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Yours very truly

Horace Walpole

CHRONICLE OF THE FERMORS:

HORACE WALPOLE IN LOVE.

By M. F. MAHONY,
(MATTHEW STRADLING,)
AUTHOR OF "THE MISADVENTURES OF MR. CATLYNE," "CHEAP JOHN'S AUCTION." "THE IRISH BAR SINISTER," ETC.

"Ours is the banquet-song's light-hearted strain,
Roses our only laurel;
The progress of a love suit our campaign,
Our only scars the gashes that remain
When romping lovers quarrel."
HORACE, Ode vi. (*Father Prout*).

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

THE COUNTESS MOTHER.

Henrietta Louisa Jefferies, grand-daughter to the notorious judge, daughter to John Lord Jefferies his equally infamous son, and wife to Thomas first Earl of Pomfret, was as enterprising and also as prosperous a fine lady as ever figured in the annals of the last or any other century. The world was full of attractions for her; there was no avenue leading to any of its prizes into which she was not eager to squeeze an entrance; and every device of her acute invention was exercised to obtain these prizes. Often indifferent as to means, the readiest instrument to hand was the one she employed—no matter what, if it answered

her purpose—and though she was envied and calumniated, and on the whole fairly detested for her success, she rarely failed to secure the end she had in view.

Not that she was a bad, or an unscrupulous woman; she was only a clever and a very business-like one. She perceived that it was sometimes necessary to lay principles aside for a season, when they happened to come awkwardly in the way of more important things; but otherwise she had, on principle, a profound respect for principles. She would not, for instance, commit herself by telling the smallest untruth if it could be avoided; but if a trifling falsehood stood in the way of an important end or aim, a place about the Court say, or the favour of a royal personage, then she was open to temptation. It is true that she had compromised herself by some positively questionable acts, but that was unavoidable, and when she did touch pitch it was invariably with such discretion as to take the least possible defilement by the contact; for she was scrupulous in that respect. Next to

wealth and Court favour, she valued reputation above all things, and contrived to maintain a character for genuineness and worth among her friends, especially for susceptibility and for the strength and durability of her attachments; although no one was more skilful in dissevering old links than she, or knew better how to drop worn-out friends quietly to leeward when they became a clog on her prosperous progress in the world.

Social prosperity was her master passion—advancement in the world, and for its own sake only. She loved to feel herself moving on, no matter in what direction so that the forward movement was appreciably sustained, and her perseverance, her fertility of resource, her ingenuity in pushing her fortunes were never at fault. No difficulty baffled her. For example, when her own personal charms began to wane she provided a substitute for that leading article of woman's influence by having a daughter lavishly endowed with beauty. The next best thing to winning

the apple of Paris oneself was to keep the prize in the family, and that she did triumphantly. Her eldest daughter, Lady Sophia Fermor, the heroine of our tale, was of unrivalled beauty; and through her charms Lady Pomfret obtained a large share of vicarious consideration. She became the envy of rival fine ladies, and enjoyed the homage of enthralled fine gentlemen, who sought to approach the handsome daughter by the easy method of doing homage to the mother.

Again, as "Shakspere and the musical glasses" was the affectation in vogue, and that persons of ton affected literature and bel esprit, the Countess determined to be a learned and literary, an æsthetic as well as a fine lady, and this by the shortest cut, in that clever, business-like, practical way which distinguished all her enterprises. With this object she contrived to establish intimacies with eminent men and women of letters, both at home and abroad. She is the Lady Pomfret to whom so many of Lady Mary Montagu's sprightly letters are addressed; to her greater honour, she was not

only the correspondent, but the valued and trusted friend of Frances Countess of Hertford, the most amiable and respected woman of her time; the angel and benefactress of poor Dick Savage, the patroness of learning and men of letters, whose portrait in Thomson's 'Spring' we find drawn in these complimentary colours:

> "O Hertford, fitted or to shine in courts
> With unaffected grace, or walk the plain
> With innocence and meditation joined
> In soft assemblage, listen to my song,
> Which thy own season paints; when nature all
> Is blooming and benevolent like thee."

As a rule, Lady Pomfret never missed an opportunity of making a desirable or a useful acquaintance; with charming candour, she admits herself, "born with a great desire to an innocent and pleasing society;" and it was probably in the belief that the son of the powerful minister would, like Lady Hertford, be an advantageous person to know that she first cultivated the acquaintance of Horace Walpole. Walpole was at this time in his heyday: young, handsome—wit and fine gentleman

combined—macaroni and cognoscente—already a referee on questions of literature, of taste, of ton —in every way a desirable appendage for a literary fine lady to carry in her train. Accordingly Lady Pomfret sought to attach him to herself: she pursued him at first with an eagerness only equalled by her subsequent anxiety to end the acquaintanceship, when the position of affairs had altered and circumstances made his friendship an obstacle to her ambition. At one time she was all admiration for Walpole's dilettante performances, but afterwards she disputed his reputation and pretensions, tittered at his verses, sneered at his conundrums, endeavoured to erect a sort of party against him, and in the end managed to secure his undying hostility. We shall see, however, that he squared accounts with her in the end, and in truth it was an unlucky accident for the Countess' literary reputation that they should ever have met.

From being the correspondent and associate of literary celebrities of her own sex, constantly receiving epigrammatic notes from Mary

Montagu, and herself compiling voluminous epistles every week for Lady Hertford, she gradually acquired a dangerous facility with her pen. This was her "Epistolary style," an accomplishment of which she was most vain, and concerning which she was always ready to absorb the strongest doses of the coarsest flattery.

Lady Mary Montagu, at this time in a mood to be pleased with anything appertaining to the Countess, writes to her on the merits of this style:

"Mrs. Bridgeman is much pleased with a letter she has had the honour to receive from your ladyship; she broke out, '*Really Lady Pomfret writes finely.*' I very readily joined in her opinion. She continued, 'Oh, so neat, *no interlineations, and such proper distances.*' This manner of praising your style made me reflect on the necessity of attention to trifles, if one would please in general."

Again:

"Yesterday was very fortunate to me; it brought me two of your ladyship's letters. I will

not speak my thoughts of them, but must insist, once for all, that you lay aside all those phrases of *tiring me*, ashamed of your dullness, &c. &c. I cannot help, when I read them, either doubting your sincerity, or fearing you have a worse opinion of my judgment than I desire you should have. Spare me these disagreeable reflections, and be assured, if I hated you, I should read your letters with pleasure, and that I love you enough to be charmed with hearing from you, though you knew not how to spell."

Walpole insists that the correspondents of Lady Pomfret had much to contend with, and that doubtful spelling was not the only defect of her famous Epistolary style: he records her astonishment on learning that Italian had verbs like English, and as illustrating the literary status of her friends, quotes a sentence from Madame Goldsworthy, "*As words is what I have not rhetoric to find out to tell you.*" Madame Goldsworthy was another favourite correspondent of the Countess.

With a large discount for personal dislike, there

is little doubt that Walpole's criticism was in some respects well grounded, for the grammar and orthography of these letters is often as original and peculiar as the sentiment and matter of them are invariably trite and commonplace. The Countess had from nature a solid gift of intellectual obtuseness, and her want of literary perception was not supplemented by reading or culture of any kind; nevertheless, as to write was fashionable, she acquired an appetite for authorship, and gratified it by publishing a translation of Froissart's Chronicles; moreover, she actually wrote, or rather half wrote, a Life of Vandyck,—for it was never finished. This was the measure of her literary success, but it was sufficient for her ambition.

The mere fact of authorship conferred a certain right of itself to pronounce on matters of taste and belles-lettres, and to enjoy the exercise of this prerogative she gave refined conversazioni and thin intellectual teas, where many tame lions of the town were occasionally to be found, well-bred geniuses and celebrities, whether genuine or mock,

with here and there a tatterdemalion poet, or a dramatist unknown to fame, scattered through the crowd of mincing fine ladies and modish men of taste.

At these assemblies my lady appeared dressed in proper character, splendid in jewels and finery, the rouge and powder, like her comely airs and affectations, laid on with an unsparing hand; her obstinate embonpoint, and her energy of manner, laced down into awkward slimness and uneasy repose. A patronising hostess, yet the tone of her patronage, like the satin of her amber-flamed petticoat, too obviously fine. A Pompadour Dresden figure—rather imitation Pompadour in coarser china. The boudoir table strewn with objects of taste and works of art; handsome copies of the Froissart and Vandyck lying around, on every side; beaux ogling and bending; bohemians cringing; Walpole perhaps making a face behind her chair, or whispering her last escapade in grammar into the ear of George Montagu—it was a picture for Hogarth.

Lady Pomfret's attempts at authorship were, however, but by way of refined pastime to utilize intervals of leisure, and fill in the interstices of an active business life—the motive of her existence was, as we have said, to rise in the world; to obtain all the wealth, honour, profit, and consideration within her reach; and for this she spared no labour, was stayed by no impediment, nor daunted by any personal disqualifications, however extreme. She altered everything to suit her purposes; she even altered her ancestors; and, as fortune had been unkind to her in the matter of pedigree, she undertook even to remodel that. Cursed both by father and grandfather with as bad a parentage as any noble lady in England need blush to own, she nevertheless inherited a maternal strain of good Herbert blood, and with this antidote she managed to neutralize the poison of the Jefferies descent. Persons employed in the Heralds' Office were found willing enough to aid in the operation, and she trafficked with them to such good purpose that, under the authority of the seal of that in-

stitution, she ultimately obtained a new pedigree, which made herself and Lord Pomfret severally descend from Edward III. by his two queens. People scoffed at her pretensions, but she stoutly persevered in them, and in the end sufficiently established her claims to royal descent. Lucky opportunities of advancement came in the way afterwards, and she utilized them all. Being Lady of the Bedchamber to Caroline, queen of George II., she worked on the favour of her royal mistress so well, and made such interest with statesmen of influence about the Court, that her husband was raised from the barony of Lempster to the earldom of Pomfret: this was shortly after her marriage. In less than two years she had turned her meek, incapable, unaspiring, henpecked husband into a full-fledged earl. It was her own unaided achievement, and she was pardonably vain of it: "my earl," "my own creation," as she loved to repeat. Followed further successes and promotions. She was always ready for a chance, and invariably contrived to keep on the sunny side of the wall,

however the wind blew. When, for instance, a vacancy occurred in the household of the queen, the Countess brought down the appointment to her own gun from amongst a host of competitors, and behold, to the consternation and envy of everybody, "my earl" becomes Master of the Horse to her Majesty. This last rise gave scope to evil tongues; slander whispered that her Ladyship had not played quite fair in the transaction, and that the appointment was won by certain operations, more clever than discreet; something even beyond a mere exercise of boudoir-craft. People spoke very freely of Lady Sundon in connection with the affair. Lady Sundon was at this time prime favourite with the queen, and, besides, on intimate terms with our Countess; and though Lady Sundon never took money, and was quite above accepting an open bribe, still Lady Pomfret, to testify her esteem for the favourite, presented her, out of dear regard, with a most becoming pair of diamond earrings, worth good fourteen hundred pounds of British money. It

was munificent, and moreover a very hazardous stroke of business; but "the earrings" happened to be much wanted, and Lady Pomfret possessed a rare aptitude for lucky mercantile operations; with a special instinct for doing things at the proper moment. This well-invested fourteen hundred pounds was ultimately repaid with usurious interest, for on the death of Queen Caroline, the Earl and Countess of Pomfret, with all the rest of her Majesty's household, were, according to custom, handsomely pensioned for life; and it is from this point that the reader's attention is especially invited to this narrative.

The queen died in 1737, the year after the marriage of the Prince of Wales. Lord and Lady Pomfret being thus thrown out of office, relieved from all attendance at Court, and presumably having nothing further to hope for under the new dynasty, decided to emigrate for a season to the Continent. There was a group of beautiful daughters to educate for the London market, a fast son to be lured away from the vice and

extravagance of the town, and, besides, the world was to be seen and enjoyed; first in Paris, where the family rested an entire twelvemonth; afterwards in Rome, Naples, Florence. But if the Countess arranged to allow herself a well-earned holiday from court intrigue, she by no means intended to eat the bread of idleness while abroad; her business eye was never closed; wherever she appears on the Continent we see her indefatigable in the labours of society, seeing sights, attending petty levées, and working heaven and earth to make desirable acquaintances for herself and her brood.

CHAPTER II.

IN ARCADIA.

In 1740 three years after their departure from England, we find the Pomfrets after many wanderings definitively fixed at the Palazzo Ridolfi, one of the most picturesque residences in Florence.

The Palazzo possessed some architectural features, a few good pictures, and a gallery in fresco; but its principal attractions were, first, its situation on the Arno, in the midst of a country as green and well wooded as England; and next, its gardens, which for their beauty and extent were already famous throughout Italy.

"It is literally an Arcadia here," writes Lady Pomfret to her friend Frances of Hertford. "Wherever we turn new beauties are to be found. There are public gardens which we frequent in the after-

noons and enjoy amazingly, and from the windows of our house we have a view of the citizen folk and common people on Sundays and fête days, making holiday on the opposite bank of the river."

Here it was that, fatigued with change, and allured by the comfort and elegance of the residence, the Countess decided on dwelling for a season.

The locality was found to suit her in every respect, for in addition to the picturesque charms of the neighbourhood, Florence itself was crowded with strangers, and society there largely composed of travelling English, which at that period of costly locomotion meant the cream of London—all that was best in the items of birth and wealth, talent or celebrity. The Countess discovered that with travelling English the Lung' Arno was peopled, and the pleasures of Arcadia became accordingly enhanced. She was at once in her own element, both on the side of literature as well as fashion. Mary Montagu, with all her faculties

undimmed, was to be gossiped with every day. Lady Mary was no longer young; nor, indeed, very charming either, if Walpole is to be trusted, who portrays some of these learned personages in his Florentine letters of the time:

"On Wednesday," he writes, "we expect a third she meteor. Those learned luminaries, the Ladies Pomfret and Walpole, are to be joined by the Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. You have not been witness to the rhapsody of mystic nonsense which these two fair ones debate incessantly, and consequently cannot figure what must be the issue of this triple alliance. Only figure the coalition of prudery, debauchery, sentiment, history, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and metaphysics; all except the second understood by halves, by quarters, or not at all. You shall have the journals of this notable academy. Adieu."

Again:

"Did I tell you Lady Mary Wortley is here? She laughs at my Lady Walpole, scolds my Lady Pomfret, and is laughed at by the whole town.

Her dress, her avarice, and her impudence must amaze any one that ever heard her name. She wears a foul mob, that does not cover her greasy black locks, that hang loose, never combed or curled; an old mazarine blue wrapper, that gapes open and discovers a canvas petticoat. Her —— face partly covered with plaster, and partly with white paint, which for cheapness she has bought so coarse that you would not use it to wash a chimney. In three words I will give you her picture as we drew it in the 'sortes Virgilianæ':

'Insanam vatem aspicies.'

I give you my honour we did not choose it."

Here is another morsel:

"As for the Academy, I am not of it, but frequently in company with it; 'tis all disjointed. Madam * * * (Lady Pomfret), who, though a learned lady, has not lost her modesty and character, is extremely scandalized with the other two dames, especially with Moll Worthless, who knows no bounds. She is at rivalry with Lady Walpole

for a Mr. ——, whom perhaps you knew at Oxford. Lady Mary is so far gone, that to get him from the mouth of her antagonist she literally took him out last night to dance country dances at a formal ball, where there was no measure kept in laughing at her old, foul, tawdry, plastered personage. She played at pharaoh two or three times at Princess Craon's, where she cheats horse and foot. She is really entertaining. I have been reading her works, which she lends out in manuscript; but they are too womanish. I like few of her performances. I forgot to tell you a good answer of Lady Pomfret's to Mr. ——, who asked her if she did not approve Platonic love? 'Lord, sir,' says she, 'I am sure any one that knows me never heard that I had any love but one; and there sit two proofs of it'—pointing to her two daughters."

Besides these ladies, there were Walpole's travelling companions, Spence the poet, and the young Earl of Lincoln; also Gray the poet, whose proud and sensitive nature could brook no slight,

and with whom Walpole himself quarrelled so violently afterwards.

These were all clever well-bred young men of pleasure; but of the group Lord Lincoln was the central figure, nephew and heir to the Duke of Newcastle, and therefore, in a matrimonial sense, one of the most desirable young gentlemen in Europe. Lady Pomfret readily approved of his appearance and manners, and was naturally not displeased at the opportunity of making his early acquaintance. From the date of his arrival the attractions of the residence were enhanced by a variety of amusements projected in his honour.

There were garden parties, and pleasant afternoon excursions to picturesque hamlets, to banquet on fresh plucked fruits. Unceremonious expeditions, where Walpole, Spence, and young Earl Lincoln went as members of the family. Also visits to ruins in the environs, where the learned Countess had opportunities of ventilating her artistic sympathies, and displayed her knowledge of classical architecture, by delivering oracular

lectures on sculptured fragments. Picture galleries were inspected in the same critical spirit, and Titian condemned for his want of chiaroscuro and sentiment, and general inferiority to the great master Sir Antonio Vandyck, whose biography the Countess had written. She declared that Vandyck was the one Ionic pillar supporting the temple of Art. On either hand the coarser Doric and florid Corinthian column was common enough, but the Fleming alone possessed the qualities of grace, strength, and simplicity, combined in justly balanced parts. This in the dogmatic tone that always convinced the silent auditory, in which Walpole stood a dutiful and attentive listener.

Lady Pomfret had also formed opinions on the Italian muse. She favoured Mr. Spence with an analysis of the *terza rima* of Dante, whom she preferred to Petrarch, who had written both *canzoni* and *sonetti*, which she explained were not at all the same thing as so many people supposed. But beyond either Dante or Laura's lover, the patriotic

poet Filicaia had won her approval, chiefly, as it turned out, because of the touching line—

"Dono infelice di bellezza;"

which, with a tearful air, the Countess said always made her think of her daughter Sophia, and tremble for her future.

However, Lady Pomfret did not employ all her time in art and literature, or the delights of artless friendship, though she had confined herself at first to giving quiet and select parties, at which only Lord Lincoln and his friends, and the best of the English set were present. But extending her wings more and more by degrees, she ended in grand entertainments, to which all the good Florentine families were invited, and so throngs of fashionable people assembled in the frescoed gallery, and the Palazzo became famous. We find it referred to in contemporary letters home as the most frequented and brilliant *salon* of the light-hearted Tuscan capital.

The Countess accordingly grew to be a very

important personage without much trouble. All her tastes were gratified, life in Florence became scarcely less exciting than in London itself; and owing to peculiar circumstances, was far more interesting. What wonder if in a short time Lady Pomfret discovered that her proper insular contempt for continental society had relaxed in favour of those useful foreigners, who were now merely acting the part of a necessary chorus to that opera in real life of which Lord Lincoln and her daughter were filling the leading parts of *jeune premier* and soprano? And how gracefully the performance commenced under that azure sky of Italy, the heaven of Romeo and Juliet. These Arcadian bowers, how sweetly they framed in the living picture! What becoming scenery they made! it was enchantment! All the stage properties were perfect. And oh—how sweetly Romeo sang, and how bright and joyous the peerless Juliet! As yet no swords of Capulet or Montague were clashed to startle the coy seraph happiness, hovering above the youthful pair. We are at the first act only;

the fiddling of the orchestra is soft and melodious, dreamlike as the murmuring of distant harp-strings; the young leaves are out and the roses budding, and life is long and hope is strong, and love—love is immortal, its smooth course flows on without a ripple; and the fond maternal bosom glows with the hope of anticipated capture as the great matrimonial prize comes swimming farther into the shoal water, sniffing unsuspiciously at the corks and meshes of the hungry family bag-net treacherously spread for him under the surface.

Yet the action of the drama moves on quietly, without sensational scenes, but with such growing effect that the interest becomes painful at last. It is not always young people only who are most interested by the incidents and progress of a love suit. Many a sleepless night had the Countess mother, from her wakeful pillow watching the starry Tuscan heavens pale into the dawn; and when the day came it was still in delicious dreamland, the present was filled with promise, and the future all bright with hope. Yet the anticipated fortune was

so great, that it dazzled as well as inflamed her imagination—quenched while it stimulated desire, even the very thought of the coveted title oppressed her.

Mother to the Duchess of Newcastle—*mother-in-law to the Duke?* It was so much—could it ever be? was it safe at all to reckon on the possibility of such a stupendous achievement as that? Never was woman alive better constituted to enjoy all the sweets and privileges of such a dear maternity-in-law; and if, on the other hand, Providence held such a relationship in store for Lord Lincoln, it was probably by way of merciful compensation, as a wholesome tonic added to the mingled sweets of his cup of fortune, and that was already overflowing.

He had been early adopted by his uncle, the Duke of Newcastle. The duke was the greatest man in England in his own opinion, and in that of all the powerful Pelham faction and of their numerous flock of political followers.

Moreover, Lincoln was rich in all those personal gifts and graces which, in the estimation of a

manœuvring matron, invariably accompany distinguished birth and ample fortune. Well-bred and amiable, gifted by nature both in mind and person, the Countess would, in fact, have preferred him less perfect in every way, as he would then have appeared less out of her reach. It was like having honey for sauce to sugar, that a man so favoured by fortune should also be endowed with personal advantages which would have rendered him estimable without a shilling. The Countess was clear-sighted as to the position of affairs, and did not deceive herself as to the difficulties of the enterprise. To attain to so lofty a perch as the dukedom would require skill and enterprise, aided by good luck; besides, there were positive impediments in the way, enough of them to cause a less resolute nature to reflect: but Lady Pomfret was not one to turn her face from an obstacle, or avoid taking the chance of an honest stumble coming in a fair way of business.

If, in an occasional fit of despondency, the prize seemed beyond attainment, there were brighter

moments when the ripening beauty of her daughter, Lady Sophia, filled her with a delicious surprise, and Lord Lincoln's evident appreciation of it, with confidence and renewed hope. After all, superior beings of finer clay, heirs to ducal fortunes, married, as a rule, much like earthenware mortals. Why might it not be Lincoln's fate to marry well, and select early? In fact, a wife was the only blessing which it seemed possible to add to his singularly favoured lot. And if the stars willed that he should lose his bachelor liberty, and find an early happiness now in Florence, who would not envy him? What if it did happen? By-and-by, when he arrived at the fulness of all his honours, he might, in any case, present his wife to the criticism of the world, and fearlessly challenge Europe round to produce another duchess her peer.

CHAPTER III.

LADY SOPHIA.

Though female loveliness was by no means rare in the last century, and the Court of George II. was especially distinguished for the beauty of its maids of honour, there is abundant evidence to show that Lady Sophia Fermor surpassed all competitors.

At her appearance in the world she became the attraction of the season, the envy of rival belles and despair of fashionable mothers. The greatest people at Court, the king himself, was on the list of her admirers. She is mixed up in the famous gossip of the time, and her name occurs frequently in that compendious tattling correspondence which has come down to us.

Her figure was alike graceful and majestic; her features delicate yet perfect, and full in outline; the

face beaming with vivacity and expression: her hair a dark auburn, rippling with lights; and her eyes of that deep lustrous blue always allied with rare intelligence, which was in her case developed by careful and elaborate culture.

Contemporary writers sound a common note of admiration on this theme. The beauty of her person, the perfection of her mind, the rarity of her natural gifts, the range of her accomplishments—they are never done sounding her praises. Even the hereditary beauty of the Fermors was surpassed in her; and the strain of beauty running in the Fermor blood was already famous; it had been celebrated in song. A direct ancestress, Mistress Arabella Fermor, was the heroine of the 'Rape of the Lock,' and Pope has left her portrait in the well-known lines:

"On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore
Which Jews might kiss, and infidels adore;
Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
Quick as her eyes and as unfixed as those:
Favours to none, to all she smiles extends;
Oft she objects, but never once offends.

Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
And like the sun they shine on all alike :
Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
Might hide her faults, if belles have faults to hide.
If to her shame some female errors fall,
Look on her face and you'll forget them all."

But Mistress Arabella never obtained the universal admiration which saluted Lady Sophia on her appearance in the world. Although, strictly speaking, she made her debut in society at Florence, she had been seen some years before, when only fourteen years of age, at the English Court, as one of the four maids who carried the bride's train at the marriage of Frederick Prince of Wales with the Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. The other train-bearers were the Ladies Caroline Lennox, Caroline Fitzroy, Caroline Cavendish, respectively daughters to the Dukes of Richmond, Grafton and Devonshire. Each maid wore jewels to the value of thirty thousand pounds, and was dressed in robes of cloth of silver. They were all four renowned beauties, and selected because of their beauty to grace the royal nuptials ; but the youth-

ful Lady Sophia Fermor was declared to have outshone them all. At the period of our narrative society at Florence seemed to have lost its senses about her. She excelled all models of female loveliness which the Italians had ever seen. The most extravagant compliments were paid her. People went wild—crowded in public places to see her pass by. One gifted Italian noblemen twisted all his wits away writing sonnets in her praise. And the English appeared to be nearly as bad as the Italians. All the letters home of this period are filled with the subject. Lady Mary Montagu, in her correspondence with Mr. Montagu, says:—"Lady Sophia Fermor has few equals in beauty and grace. I shall never be surprised at her conquests. I take great pleasure in being the spectatress of her triumphs: she so far outshines all Florentine beauties that none of them dare appear before her, yet I assure you her beauty is her least merit."

Walpole himself was one of the earliest victims of her charms. He chronicles the splendours of

her beauty in every allusion to the Pomfrets at this time, his letters teem with panegyrics, she was faultless in his eyes. He makes no secret either of his admiration or of his feelings towards her, and is never done lamenting that a creature so perfect should be the child of such a mother. Walpole quickly perceived the maternal hopes which Lord Lincoln's arrival had already excited, and his sentences are never so elaborately pointed as when dwelling upon them: he delights in ridiculing the Countess in every way, in exhibiting her absurdity, and her intrigues. But he likewise very clearly exposes his own bitterness at the manifest encouragement accorded to a successful rival. Mr. Warburton, it is true, affirms that Lady Charlotte Fermor, the younger sister, was the object of his passion; but no student of his letters can doubt that it was Lady Sophia, alone. During the whole of his long life he never seems to have had a genuine attachment for any other woman; and up to her marriage, or after it—ay, or even after her death—never to have lost his inclination for her.

It is pleasant to picture the supercilious hypercritical Horace caught like a schoolboy in a warm fit of genuine first love; undergoing the hot and cold of passion, the pangs of jealousy, or else plotting and intriguing to circumvent his more fortunate friend. How maliciously he must have laboured at first to tangle up the angling tackle of the aspiring Countess, while objurgating his fate and his stars, in moody rides along the Cascine, or in moonlight saunterings by the wooded Arno! One sees the hypocritical change of his manner towards the Countess, also his careful abstinence from the old habits of ridicule, his charitable blindness to her grammar, his attention to her literary reminiscences as well as to her discourses on the chiaroscuro and modelling of Vandyck, the compliments to her discernment, the flattery, the venal applause. What a pleasant Arcadia it must have been, what a happy time for the Countess, with the heir to the Duchy of Newcastle, the first match in England, making love to her daughter, and Walpole, son of the great minister, the most accomplished gentleman of note

in Europe, making love to herself! How smoothly life must have gone on then! What soothing interior harmony underlying the brilliant exterior bustle of the household, until the hour when its mistress first perceived the real state of affairs, and scented a taint on the breath of this sly Horatian flattery!

But the discovery came at last, with all the suddenness of a surprise. Fancy the first dawnings of a humiliating suspicion; then the clear perception that, with all her marvellous business talents, she was being outwitted, outmanœuvred, by a fledgling petit-maître like Walpole. She who had secured sinecures and pensions, presented diamond earrings, created an earldom, appointed a Master of the Horse—who, in despite of grammar and a sincere ignorance, had usurped a learned reputation, and had come to regard success as the rule in all her speculations—that she should be balked in a matter so peculiarly her own as a matchmaking enterprise, and by a conceited stripling!

Imagine the shock to her vanity, the feelings

of her mundane maternity outraged, alarmed; then the consciousness of real danger from her daughter's possible susceptibility to the many fascinations of the accomplished Horace! Imagine the ire which this enkindled, the commotion in the Palazzo which followed from it! One sees the round, rouged, comely face puckering into anxieties; the high-pitched treble of her anger rings in our ears. How she must have raged and banged the doors, and shrilled at Sophia, and rated in broad English before "my Earl," and in execrable Italian at the scared native menials. The Countess had not the faculty of holding herself in when under strong excitement; notwithstanding her habits of intrigue, she had little power of self-restraint. Interior disturbance was immediately followed by a visible eruption of temper, and in her angry moods there was little interval of time between the lightning and the thunder-clap.

It is therefore probable that at the moment she committed herself in some positive way with

Walpole. How, we do not know; what passed between them is a matter of conjecure only; but it is certain that he suddenly abdicated the position of an admirer of Lady Sophia, and left Lord Lincoln alone in the field. There was no open rupture; Walpole continued apparently as intimate as ever with the family; but he was finally out of competition for the favour of Lady Sophia. Perhaps this was in deference to the expostulation of the Countess, or perhaps in despair, at recognising that he could have no chance with his paltry sinecure of two thousand pounds a year against the ducal expectations of his rival, or perhaps it was out of revenge that he retired from the contest, because of the private affairs of Lord Lincoln, of which he alone was in the secret. For there was a secret. Lincoln was an engaged man, and Walpole knew it. Before starting on his foreign tour the young earl had gone down to Esher, the seat of his uncle, Henry Pelham, to comply with a family arrangement by which the wealth of the Pelhams, united to the title of Newcastle, should vest in his person;

and he had left Esher engaged to his cousin, the heiress Catherine Pelham—a lady by no means wanting in personal attractions or in graces of mind and disposition, and who had been brought up to consider the handsome Lincoln as her affianced husband, and was not inclined to quarrel with her fate.

Yet Lincoln behaved like a free man; possibly he was led by degrees into the meshes of the net in which he found himself swiftly and unwittingly entangled. A spirit of emulation or of vanity, or an irresistible attraction, or mere indolence, may have led him to pay attention to Lady Sophia at first; but he soon accepted a recognised position beside her, moving step after step farther on into the dim twilights of the charming *pays du tendre*, plucking the lotos in those fragrant orange bowers, dreaming nights and days away in blissful forgetfulness of his pledges and his fate and of the consequences to follow from his treachery.

It was a false game all through. Lincoln held

his winning hand only by playing with cogged dice; and Walpole, standing by, was aware of the cheat.

How the knowledge of it must have buoyed up the youthful cynic, and fed the hungry jealousy that devoured him!

One sees him lounging apart on the balcony of the Ridolfi, a thin smile curving his firm lips, a metallic glitter in the cold hard eyes as they followed the movements of the lovers loitering in the garden beneath.

He could already see the end of that happy and prosperous wooing. Blessed as the pair were with wealth and beauty, and love to crown the union, they too—the paragon and the peer—should reap only a heart-break for harvest; the flames of this budding passion would be quenched in sighs and sorrow and die out in ashes like his own. How he hugged the thought of it!

Yet Lincoln was going very far. Rumour caught up the affair, and made its own of it; details of the courtship found their way into the

gossiping letters which were sent to England; the young earl became the subject of the praises of all those of whom he was not the envy. His person and his manners were commended; he was not only remarkable for his sense and ability, but even for his dancing; and in the last century this accomplishment was of great importance in the education of a gentleman; even in the progress of this courtship it marked an epoch. For at a state ball given by the British ambassador at Florence, Lord Lincoln especially distinguished himself in this way. Lady Sophia Fermor and my lord executed a famous minuet together amidst a press of surrounding spectators, who were already beginning to whisper that the handsome couple were engaged.

Walpole, who was in this circle of admirers, was very witty and sarcastic at his friend's excellent performance, and delivered many an ironical encomium on the young earl's successful capering. What a pleasant scene it must have been for him! How thoroughly he enjoyed himself on that night

of the embassy ball! What a genial light on his long face! how brilliant and talkative he was! how gay, how polite his replies to the reiterated inquiries regarding the presumed prospects of his handsome friend. How cordially he responded to the good wishes of which Lady Sophia Fermor and Lord Lincoln were jointly the object!

CHAPTER IV.

A COUNTERMARCH.

A THUNDERBOLT bursts suddenly in the blue firmament over the Palazzo Ridolfi. Lincoln receives a letter from England ordering him home.

Rumours concerning the Pomfrets had perhaps reached the Duke of Newcastle's ears, and shrewd enough to scent out danger of that treacherous kind, he writes peremptorily to his nephew "to finish his idleness and his tour, and return to England forthwith." There were special reasons for it, and these were artfully put forward in a flattering form.

His letter explained that a favourable juncture in politics offered Lincoln an opportunity of taking an active part in Parliament. On that account, the duke desired *his* assistance in the House; he

required it even, especially as there was likelihood of a crisis, and if the Pelhams came into power Lincoln was to be made Irish Secretary. This was very flattering. That appointment was then as now, the first step on the upper degrees of the Treasury ladder; and no special gifts of statesmanship, nor capacity, nor knowledge of the perplexing sister island was expected from the man in whose hands its government was placed—exactly as at present, when to be ignorant, supercilious, and dull, appear to be among the qualifications for administering that critical office.

Besides, family affairs, as well as politics, demanded his return: the duke explained what these were by adding that they were impatient to see him at Esher—Henry Pelham's place; and hinted that, as everything was prepared for it, Lincoln might, if disposed, be married on reaching England, or as soon as he pleased afterwards.

When young Lieutenant Osborne suffered an unexpected blight of his budding affections, as we read in the famous history of 'Vanity Fair,' he

encountered an unhappy boy whipping his top on the flags in his way, and smarting under the recent wound, that spirited young officer relieved his agony by magnificently kicking the urchin's plaything into the adjacent area. The act probably did him good; it was English, it was irrational; but it eased his mind, and was at all events better than to commit some dreadful action—suicide or sudden matrimony say—as would the young Frenchman of fiction placed in a like situation.

There was no top spinning on the Lung' Arno for Lord Lincoln to kick out of the way when the cut which that letter dealt him began to bite and fester, as it quickly did; but he mounted his horse and had a hot and eager gallop along the Cascine. A group of stonecutters, returning to their work at the Villa Visconti façade, were chanting a serenade of Vittorelli—

> "Guarda che bianca luna!
> Guarda che notte azzurra!"

when the excited young earl came skurrying in amongst them, interrupting the chorus and bringing

out a deep guttural "Sacramento!" and other pectoral maledictions from the swarthy band.

Afterwards Lincoln dismounted, and giving his horse to the groom, walked meditatively back towards the town. Walking was better for him; he found it easier to keep pace with the rapidity of his thoughts on foot.

This letter was as unexpected as unwelcome; it was offensive: his spirit rose at the mandatory tone of the missive. Was he a child, to be capriciously commanded hither and thither? Should he be coerced into this prearranged Pelham marriage whether he would or not? No duke or uncle in England should do that, he vowed. He would return home or remain abroad, as it suited him; and marry or not, as leisure or inclination prompted.

But until that moment he had never examined himself as to his possible want of inclination in this regard. Now independence of spirit seemed to have become the first of personal qualities; it appeared noble in the highest degree, like a youthful knight of old romance, to fling the great

world and its small ambitions aside for the sake of a lady fair, but unhappily there were two fair ones in this case, and the line which duty and honour prescribed was wavering and indistinct. If it were merely a question of the loss of sundry lands and honours, and thousands of income, as against the indulgence of the amorous impulse which was so strong on him then, Lincoln was well disposed to adopt a startling resolution —but Catherine Pelham!

He could not bring himself to consider her in the light of a chattel, to be adopted or neglected at his pleasure. Until now he had never doubted his attachment to her. She had not done anything to forfeit his esteem: it was impossible to entertain a disparaging thought regarding her.

Somehow devotion to Lady Sophia Fermor became a less chivalrous sentiment when opposed to the claims of his cousin; and his own conduct failed to sustain the highly complimentary light which he desired it to bear. Lincoln shrank from a betrayal of his word; he was young and unspoilt

as yet; the bare suspicion of a dishonourable action was intolerable: yet, honour sounded as binding in one case as the other. What an imbroglio it was! How hopelessly intricate the tangle of his destiny had become! He seemed condemned by fate to enact a doubtful part in any case; his conduct must be unbecoming and unworthy, leaving him for only choice the particular kind of baseness to select from. What was to be his decision in this delicate and difficult crisis? Who was to be the victim? Which of his two mistresses the jilted one? His inquisitive conscience pressed for an answer. What a position for a vain and chivalrous young gentleman, of a frank and not ungenerous nature, to stand racking his brains for an answer to these questions! Beside him the Arno flowed, its wooded banks dotted with palaces and villas steeped in light; in front the clustering spires of the churches, floating in the Tuscan air; in the midst of them Giotto's wonder. Some mouldering columns of Caligula's villa, bound in coils of vine, looked big in the foreground, a sunbeam playing

on the basking lizards, a broken shaft protruding through the leaves; one is familiar with that pictured foreground. A temple of pleasure and power, where now only death inhabited; there Lincoln saw a symbol of that vain ambition to which they sought to devote him. Further on, it was a grotto consecrated to Apollo—Apollo, the god of love. How he hated the landscape! Then came a torrent of feeble regrets. Why had he ever set foot in Tuscany at all, or trusted himself so far into temptation, or set eyes on this wondrous creature, or lost his soul in the witchery of her charms?

A sun ray whitened the turrets of the Ridolfi on the opposite bank of the river. It seemed like a direct invitation to him. There was a by-path leading to the bridge.

In his excited and incoherent mood he felt that sympathy and assistance were only to be found there; at all events it was a way of escaping from the immediate ordeal of making up his mind; so he went straight to the Ridolfi. Yet without any

formed intention of exhibiting his uncle's letter, and least of all, we may presume, of truthfully explaining the very delicate circumstances which caused his agony.

One of the younger daughters met him on entering the house, and open-mouthed he declared the possible object of his visit to her: "He might have to go to England, perhaps immediately."

Lady Sophia was dressing for an excursion when this indiscreet sister ran upstairs, bringing the news that "Lord Lincoln was about to leave for England, and had called to say farewell."

She went on with her dressing for a moment, then dismissed her maid, and taking the child beside her on the sofa, kissed her gently, and asked her to repeat exactly the very words which Lord Lincoln had spoken.

In the end Lady Sophia changed her mind; she did not go out that forenoon. She divined the substance of what had happened; it flashed on her like an inspiration.

It might be that insight into her lover's charac-

ter had made it already clear that in the face of sustained or extreme opposition no great devotion was to be expected from him. However amiable in disposition, he was not of the heroic order. And in any case she had no knowledge of his feelings. It was only now that she began to realise or to discover what her own were—what they might be, rather. She had been living a life of fantasy in heedless security; and an awakening shock came suddenly to shatter the gilded dangerous dream which had been her life. She could not meet Lincoln now without betraying that which she blushed to discover to herself. Remember her age; she was all simplicity and inexperience. Scarcely had she yet opened her eyes on that world which was already beginning to wonder at her beauty.

She did not go downstairs to bid farewell; she could not see him then. She did not want to hear the sentence from his own lips—the recital in detail of those pressing motives which compelled him unwillingly to desert her. It was enough that she was abandoned, and that he was false.

For some time she sat motionless, half dressed, staring blankly at the pale reflection in her toilet mirror. In a while Lincoln, who was impatiently pacing the drawing-room, learnt that she had a headache, and did not intend to see him.

It happened, however, that Lady Pomfret was in the garden, choosing a bouquet for the fête of Princess Craon, when the news of Lady Sophia's sudden indisposition reached her: she returned to the house at once, and observing Lord Lincoln's troubled features staring through the vine leaves which framed in the window of the vestibule where he waited, she smiled to him on entering the house and passed on; but on entering Lady Sophia's chamber she heard that his lordship had not come to join them in a ride on the Lung' Arno, but to say farewell and set forth for England. Then the Countess turned pale and slowly laid down her flowers.

If Lady Sophia was unwilling to have an interview with her lover, her mother was of a different mind; and the pallor of her face

changed to a deep flush as she redescended the marble staircase to offer her compliments to Lord Lincoln, and learn what account he had to give of himself. He turned quickly when the door opened, then stammered and hesitated—he had not expected the mother. Lord! how frightened the man looked, how mean! the Countess thought. His dress was strangely disordered, the powder of his hair had scattered down over the shoulders and breast of his long mulberry riding-coat, and whitened on his cheek, though that was white enough before. He wore no sword, he had left that weapon with his groom: he did not want to run anybody through with it now that he meditated running away. How prejudice and anger blind one! Even the experienced, the skilful, and the prudent are not always proof against the sudden assaults of passion. The Countess wondered how she could have ever thought him agreeable or handsome; he had not even the *bel air*, as he stood cringing behind the drawing-room table, fumbling at his hat. Was

this the pretty gentleman who had been her daughter's partner and the envy of the room at the embassy ball?—whose dancing had provoked the sneers of Walpole and the envy of that talented young Roman Prince Lello Saltimbanco, whose rising fame on his toes had already travelled as far north as Turin, and who claimed to have the smartest minuet step of any leg in the whole Italian Boot?

But Lincoln endeavoured to express his business, and stammered on about his precious letter, and the command of his uncle the duke which ordered him home.

Here the Countess exploded.

"And you are going, my lord? and you are going?" she repeated; but the words choked her.

In her view it was evident that, if he hesitated about flight at all, it was only in deference to or out of consideration for his own inclinations; that he had no impression of the claims of others upon his honour or his affections; that he regarded himself as perfectly free in every way, and not at all committed by any past proceedings—by the distinct

personal advances which he had so heedlessly or so audaciously made. This she saw or concluded that she saw; and here it was that the temper of the Countess broke loose—mere petulance overmastered her. She was mistaken, however, and for the success of her project it was a fatal error. Had she guessed it, all that Lincoln required was such mental support and assistance as she might easily have supplied him with. A little dexterous manipulation at that moment of indecision would have given him resolution, and made her own of him at a stroke, and ruined the schemes of the duke and the family at Esher. A degree more of coolness and circumspection, and the Pelham alliance was at an end. But her impulse was already beyond control: it was another of those frequent occasions in the life of the Countess when mere combustion of temper defeated her.

"And you are going, my lord? My daughter is ill in her chamber. I shall convey your respects to her, and say that you obey the duke:—his grace is fortunate in a dutiful nephew."

"Lady Sophia ill! but I must see her!" cried out Lord Lincoln, bounding across the room.

"It is needless, my lord; she'll mend without your attention. Pray consider your health and your uncle, and do not distress yourself.

"I shall tell her that you were overcome, and that, only you have to pack your trunks, you would be in despair. And look, my lord! Here is your portrait, which, to my surprise, I find you presented to my daughter. Your family might not care to have so precious an object of art travelling in Tuscany; you had better take care of it." She flung the locket on the table. "It has neither interest nor value for any one in this house. You may find use for it at home, or else your uncle the duke may instruct you how to dispose of it again in some proper manner.

"My lord, spare your speeches; explanations are unnecessary. We understand each other, I think. You have only to make your bow with the best grace you can manage. Whether it is a becoming one or not, I leave you to judge.

Farewell;" and the Countess courtesied scornfully, with her hand upon the bell-rope.

This was an electric shock to Lincoln; as if a bolt had suddenly descended on his head; and he was dazed and startled at the strange stunning sensation. Until that awakening moment he was not conscious that any human being, that any voice but that of his own conscience, was entitled to address him in terms of reproach.

If he felt in truth something slightly like a villain perhaps, that was no concern of those who had not the privilege of looking into his heart and who could know nothing of the unhappy engagement with his cousin. It was a secret in his own breast, and without express evidence of its knowledge no one had a right to be aware of it. Besides, did he know that he was going to behave ill when he had not yet determined how to proceed? He might yet turn out to be a hero after all; perhaps it was the other side —the other lady that he should decide to betray. But now his pride rebounded at the shock of this encounter—the collision was rude. He was

outraged, indignant: he took the angry matron at her word, and turned on his heel.

Lady Charlotte heard his spurs jingling as he descended the marble stairs, and bounded out to meet him in a girlish way. She was in riding costume, and asked if he had come to be her escort; but my lord made her a stately salute, and regretted that his engagements forbade him that honour.

Lady Charlotte stared in a frightened way at his royal bearing.

He reached the town in a fume; then hurriedly crossed the river to his palazzo.

Alphonse, the new French valet, was reclining on a sculptured seat by the columns of the entrance. It was the sentimental menial's first visit to Italy, "the pays of his soupirs," and he was meritoriously making use of the opportunity "to study in this même Florence, cradle of the arts, the mœurs of this people artiste." He had accordingly hired a goatherd "to délasser him with an air montagnard," as he sat sipping the execrable wine of the country in the shadow of the porch.

This goatherd was a fat garlic-eating rogue, who had never tended other flocks than the pack of foreign visitors and tourists who crowded the inns and lodging-houses: he carried a long pointed greasy hat over his wavy hair, a skin pelisse, a stone bottle at his girdle, and his round lazy legs, which had never done any work harder than to bake in the sun, were latticed with cross-gartering thongs. He stood blowing through his pipe, one forefinger uplifted on the stop, exactly as we may see him at this hour performing in living Berlin wool on many a gilded pole-screen, or in chalky looking lithographs in second-rate print shops.

This representative Tuscan stood in place of the urchin's top to the angry Lieutenant Osborne referred to before. Lord Lincoln did not kick him into the area railings—there are none to Italian palaces—but he sent the wretch screaming from the porch with a stroke of his riding whip, and then turning on the blushing Alphonse, overwhelmed him with a torrent of invective in his native tongue.

Lincoln's French was good: he taunted his servant with dangling with the Lazzaroni of the Piazza when pressing business was to be done, and short time to do it in; "for malles were to be made, horses provided, and the départ from the hated Tuscan capital to be that very evening."

And so my lord was off; it was an open rupture. The language of the Countess alone had helped him to make up his mind; and he quitted Florence without again presenting himself at the Ridolfi, or seeing any of its inmates.

Here, then, was the end of a scheme which at one time looked so promising. Lady Pomfret felt her own share of the mishap so keenly that she did not observe how much to heart her daughter also took the disappointment.

After a defeat a general does not at once go over the numerical list of the killed and wounded to reckon up how much his battalions may have suffered in the conflict. The day is lost, that is all, and here there was active work to do; Lady Pomfret had her hands full in covering the re-

treat, in striving to conceal the disaster, in maintaining a bold and cheerful countenance. She did not at first note the hollow cheeks, and pallor and waning spirits of her daughter. There was the laughing Mary Montagu to be outfaced; Horace's sister, Lady Walpole, the other rival sham literary lady; and the pale, polite, sneering, abominable Horace himself, to be encountered every day. After the dear English friends came the corps of that motley Tuscan society for whose profit there had been so much racketing and display, and for whose amusement she had been keeping open house so long, scattering those hoarded guineas which might have been better kept in reserve for the approaching London campaign. Fancy Princess Craon and the others, the Beauveaux, the Stoschs, the Cocchi, the Blondelmonti, inquiring with covert smiles and mock airs of interest if Lord Lincoln had really gone away—gone without any project of returning—without informing his friends of his future movements or *intentions*. Imagine that, and how Henrietta, Countess of Pomfret must have

grinned into their sallow hypocritical faces for only answer.

But presently the change in her daughter excited real alarm. It was Lady Sophia's first attachment, and her first experience of disappointment and desertion. The iron entered deeply, and the wound was slow to close. She tired at once of Florence and its monotonous gaieties, of the Arno and its insipid beauty. Her mother perceived that she had lost some of her beauty, and all her spirits, so the order to march was given at once. The tents were struck.

The campaign in Tuscany had come to a close: it had been a failure. Time, money, and labour all spent there without profit; but what matter? The Countess was not one to sit down mourning in apathy and idleness. Preparations were promptly made for trying again with better luck elsewhere; for renewing operations on a larger scale at home. So the family gets under weigh, and by easy stages moves towards London; stopping at Genoa, Milan, Geneva, and Brussels by the way.

CHAPTER V.

SOME ELDERLY JUVENILES.

By an odd coincidence, Horace Walpole quits Florence immediately after the Pomfrets.

Ostensibly there was a political reason for his departure. Sir Robert Walpole's Government, then tottering before an opposition led by the able and unscrupulous Lord Carteret, needed all the parliamentary strength which it could muster, and Horace was doubtless anxious to assist his father; but strange that his letters to Sir Horace Mann at this very period give every minute detail concerning the Fermor family and its movements. It appears to be the one subject uppermost in his mind.

In October 1741 the Pomfrets reached London,

and after announcing the fact of their arrival, Walpole adds :

"I never see anything of the Pomfrets, because in the great city of London the Countess's follies do not make the same figure as they did in little Florence. Besides, there are such numbers here who have such equal pretensions to be absurd, that one is scarce aware of particular ridicules."

But in a while he sees more of them, and improves his opportunities of observation ; he is very particular to note down all that he sees :

"Lady Sophia is ill, and my Lord Lincoln *not coming*." Again : "I saw Lady Pomfret last night. Lady Sophia is still ill with a cold ; her head is to be dressed French, her body English ; for which I am sorry, her figure is so fine in a robe. She is full as sorry as I am. Their trunks have not arrived yet, so they have not made their appearance."

And so Lady Sophia was being prepared for competition at the great Epsom of Vanity Fair, and a brilliant performance there was confidently

predicted for her. Lady Pomfret had so arranged her journey as to arrive in time for the London season, and no more than in time. In George the Second's reign the season commenced in October. The affair in Florence had rendered it important to perform great things during the coming campaign. If Lord Lincoln had taken himself away it was necessary that the world should understand he had not taken sighs from either mother or daughter along with him ; also that it should see what a prize he had let slip through his fingers. Like an opulent connoisseur, he had been granted a private view of this priceless masterpiece of nature, and had not the wit to appreciate his luck or seize his opportunity. Now the gem was to be properly hung up and ticketed, and exposed for auction on the walls of the Royal Academy of fashion. The duller he, to have allowed it to come to an open market. The world at large would appreciate the value of that which he had neither the sense nor taste to admire.

Thus Lady Pomfret reasoned, counting up the

half a dozen great settlements in England that might do for Sophia, and the two or three dozen average ones that would do admirably for the less resplendent Charlotte. Both her daughters were to appear this season, and the town might be challenged to produce such another pair. Nature had done her part in adorning them, and the Countess determined to perfect the work, if pains and expense, her own taste and that handmaiden of nature a court milliner, could achieve it.

What, after all, is the use of having a pretty face without a becoming bonnet to set it off with? Which does, the frame or the picture itself, go farthest in producing an effect? In 1741 a ball was a brilliant affair, and the work of setting out a young lady in society a sufficiently engrossing occupation for herself and her family. A ball-room triumph was everything to a belle, and a sufficiently important affair even to a beau. Imagine it! At that strange epoch in the history of England not only ladies, but even gentlemen, went into society for pleasure. And when they went out they danced.

The modern plan for enjoying oneself by standing mute in a doorway was yet undiscovered. It was where the ruins of Nineveh were before Mr. Layard was born. And if men of fashion were then as ignorant as they are said to be at present; if they were as dull, shall we say, for want of a better term—as little useful—dull or no, they were more ornamental; and everybody, whether in society or not, could form an opinion upon that. No danger then of mistaking your host for that far more gentlemanly and better-bred individual his butler. Silks, velvets, gold-lace, embroidery, diamonds—but what famous tailors' bills must have been in those days! How were they ever paid? Were they ever? What a capital trade man-millinery was. Beaux must have gone out shopping every day, snipping off bits of ribbon, and matching silks, and judging of the clocking of stockings, and fingering inches of lace. How miserably at the mercy of his laundress your dandy must have been! What with his frills, his ruffles, his stays, his buckles, his garters, painting

his face and powdering his hair, how did a fine gentleman ever find time to dine and sleep?

However, the effect of a ball-room, crowded with those enamelled and brocaded figures, was, even with due allowance for the dingy tallow candles of the period, stupendous. The licence accorded to costume, even when it produced a fop and caricature in the individual, contributed only to enhance the general effect of the assembly; and the ball at Sir Thomas Robinson's of Rokeby was the most brilliant festival of the season of the year '41.

It was a juvenile ball given in honour of a young daughter of the Duke of Richmond, and all London was there; the great and small of the fashionable world, the aged and the young; as we are informed, "all, from Miss in her bib and apron to my Lord Chancellor in his bib and mace."

Walpole describes it:

"The arrangements at Sir Thomas Robinson's were so good that nobody felt a crowd. He had taken off all the doors, and so separated the old and

young, that neither inconvenienced the other. The ball began at eight : each man danced a minuet with his partner, and then began country dances. There were four and twenty couples, divided into twelve and twelve : each set danced two dances, and then retired into another room, while another set took their places, and so on alternately."

Here the ladies Fermor made their debut, and, it was said, had a marked success, both on the side of nature as of art. They outshone all others, as much by the magnificence and fashion of their toilettes as by the splendour of their beauty. Who knows which form of praise was the most acceptable to the female mind ? Ladies have views upon this graceful subject which the dull male creature can never hope to understand.

As might have been predicted, Horace Walpole did not miss this entertainment. Here we find him dancing, and perhaps enjoying himself. That he found the proceedings interesting we have his word, whether they were to his taste or not. At all events he was in the press of the fashionable

throng; and when retiring with his partner, Lady Charlotte Fermor, he came face to face with the Countess, her mother, it was the first time since their parting at Florence.

"Mr. Walpole, I protest! Ah! what joy to see you!" It seemed as if she was going to embrace him on the spot. "It does one good to see you again, such scenes as you bring back to memory. Ah!

"'Italia! Italia! o tu cui feo la sorte!
Dono infelice' ———

Dear, dear old Florence! all comes back again at sight of your pleasant face."

"My face is thankful. I took some pains to make it look its best to-night, and am glad it pleases you," said Walpole, drawing back nervously, and disengaging his hand from the prolonged clasp of the Countess. "When did your ladyship arrive? how did you perform the journey home, what befel you by the way, and how are all the friends we left behind us?—the pleasantest place, I believe, to leave most of one's friends," he added, glancing at his face in the mirror opposite. "Lady

Charlotte and I have just come to an agreement on that point."

"I left none behind," answered Lady Pomfret. "Our circle was broken up before our flight."

"Aye! so I recollect it was," said Walpole drily, and his gold eye-glass turned on Lady Sophia, who then passed, sailing by on the arm of Lord Holderness.

"Mr. Pitt of Warrender is expected every day; I understand he is also on his way home," continued Lady Pomfret.

"And Lord Lincoln travels with him," answered Walpole from behind the gold eye-glass; "he certainly does."

"But Lord Lincoln must have arrived in England long ago," said the Countess in an indifferent tone. "He quitted Florence long before us."

"By-the-by, yes, he is one of the friends who went before us, yet whom we left behind us after all," answered Walpole. "I remember. You may not remember his haste to quit Florence, but I do. Yet eager as he was to return to England, his

eagerness took breath at Paris, for he has remained there ever since. There was no longer any hurry once he had quitted Italy; it seems his uncle could do without him then. Odd, I admit, but the fact is so. Bless me, but Lady Sophia is more of a queen than ever, though she has grown lean, very lean—the excitement of travel, probably; yet I think it improves her."

"Lean! not at all, Mr. Walpole. That is but a fancy of yours, and you are by nature very fanciful. Sophia lean! It is the uncomplimentary light; or else there is something in the room to-night that makes everything look odd, for, strange! I thought the same of you. The moment I caught sight of your figure, I said to Charlotte, 'There goes Mr. Walpole, grown longer and leaner than ever.'"

"'Tis with sighing after the charming fêtes of the Palazzo Ridolfi, madam."

"There is not half of you there."

"Then so much less of my weary self to know what to do with. Congratulate me on that account."

"And it does not become you at all. People will say you are nursing some malhe*roose* passion, Mr. Walpole, who knows? if you go on in that fashion wasting away."

"I fear the nursling would perish for want of care in my unskilful hands, Lady Pomfret, if it were so. It is only victims of your sex who can perform that office gracefully, or with any hope or likelihood of obtaining hopeful results, or, in any case, universal sympathy. Sentimental misery in the male invariably provokes ridicule."

And Walpole unclasped his gold eye-glass, turning full round with a fixed smile on his angular lips. He was prepared for battle, and ready enough for a duello on the spot, if the Countess would have it.

There was a certain air of, perhaps, patronage about her; some of the old Ridolfi manner, of that period when his name too was inscribed on the unhappy list of her daughter's victims; when he had been compelled to cringe, and swallow down his grins, and bow the knee (allegorically) at her

affectations, and her learning, and her taste, and her trumpery regal manner, in hope of winning some poor crumbs of favour or encouragement; but now they were in London, and times were changed. No, Madame la Borgia, we are no longer at Rome but at Ferrara, and I am not your slave, but Duke Alfonso, and the master.

He was no longer the Peri casting longing eyes into that Paradise where he dared not set foot. He did not covet Paradise any longer, not he; and as for the angel guarding the garden of Eden with the two-edged sword, her wit—faugh! he laughed at the blunt and harmless weapon, as at this poor old raddled angel with her mock Italian and her "malheroose" French.

He was a prince and fine gentleman now. The instinct of the Countess divined the difference, and she declined the encounter.

"So you really think my daughter Sophia improved then?" she added humbly, and in a subdued voice, whisking away her rising temper with a sweep of her fan.

"You want to catch me, madam. When did Lady Sophia need improving?"

"You are such a quiz!"

"Vous le croyez?"

"If she does look well to-night, it must be her dress then, or else because she is in such capital spirits; that is the cause of it perhaps," said the Countess in a quicker tone, and with a toss of her head, which said, If you provoke me to fight I will, big a prince as you are. "I never knew my daughter in better spirits, and that affects one's appearance. Besides, her dress should be becoming, it cost me such a world of trouble. 'Twas important, you understand, this being the first season, and for other reasons," slowly, "it was equally so that she should look tolerable. You have such excellent taste, Mr. Walpole, that I should be glad to hear from you if her dress will do. My mind will be at rest about it if you approve," added the Countess grimly.

"'Tis vastly fine," he answered, looking the other way, and in a tone that made the compliment a sneer.

"It is half English, half French; a m*ay*lange, you know; they are all the fashion in Par*ee*; and I have done my best to render it perfectly modish and in good taste."

"It is plain that your ladyship's taste has presided at the affair"—a shrug. "Ah, Madame la Princesse," and he stepped forward to shake hands with a lady who rustled up in huge amplitude of brocade, her neck and arms a blaze of diamonds, which brought out reciprocal rays of envy or admiration from Lady Pomfret's active eyes.

A most magnificent and stately figure, her cold salute to the Countess being in marked contrast to the sudden sunshine of smiles which beamed on Walpole. She tapped his French sleeve reproachfully with her fan; then her eyes and diamonds sparkled playfully over the edge of it. He had forgotten his promises; he was like all poets—*volage*; and to make his peace he must come to dinner at the Ambassade on Thursday. My Lord Carteret was promised, and she had asked all the most disagreeable people in town on purpose to meet him. So

he must come or spoil the set; and with another whisper the brocade skirt sweeps away into the crowd of dancers.

The Countess was impressed by this little scene. Had she been quite wise that time in Florence when Walpole had received his curt dismissal? True, he was not a match for Sophia in any ordinary sense; but he had a certain position in town, and with his powerful father, and his own ability, there was no telling what future might be in store for him yet. Though only a bird in the bush, still, while our great lady was smarting from the cut of a greater lady still, Walpole, with his quizzing supercilious air and French suit, looked a very tempting bird of very fine feather.

"How well Madame l'Ambassadrice looks to-night! What a superb paroore of brilliants! How becomingly dressed!" lisps the Countess. "Altogether so French; charming to*ot* ensemble, and the diamonds are doubtless very fine. A present, 'tis said, from a royal duchess who is accredited with an engouement for Son Excellence. An

English wife maybe would not care to appear in those jewels; but at a certain age one gets reconciled to everything, and diamonds are always diamonds, and becoming at any age."

"Your ladyship will have long to wait for time to arrive as a peacemaker in that sense, and my Ladies Charlotte and Sophia must be very good not to feel some jealousy of their mother"—a mocking bow. "The fact is, I had promised to scribble some doggerel in madame's album, and forgot all about it. However, as I dine there on Thursday, I shall plead in excuse that all my poetry has been left behind in Italy, and the source of all inspiration also—alas!"

"La! one would think you're turning sentimental, yet you affect to have no fine feelings," said the Countess cautiously. "One never knows how to take you, Mr. Walpole."

Another great sigh. "Incompris, toujours incompris, Madame la Comtesse."

Was he laughing in her face? The Countess was not quite certain.

"Apropos talking of sentiment, there are the duke and duchess as models of it. See, yonder by the pillars; do look," said Lady Pomfret, shifting the conversation into another channel. Was ever such a caricature? Did you ever see persons of their age and condition so misconduct themselves—so foolish, so extravagant? Kissing her hand, actually kissing it again, as I'm alive, and before everybody. What would you say if my earl and I were to go on in that manner, billing and cooing in the midst of a London ball-room?"

"I should be much edified."

"But would it not be very ridiculous?"

"In your case—how can you ask? My dear madam, how can you?"—bowing.

"Where there is such a display of affection I incline to doubt its reality," said the Countess dogmatically. "Would not you? These people may tear their eyes out behind the scenes, for all we know. It is too ridiculous, such airs and graces, with every one of five and twenty children between them."

"Nothing surpasses the ridicule of having five and twenty children, I admit. However, the duchess is so extremely well preserved that one excuses the gallantry of the old duke."

"I consider such behaviour ill-bred and barbarous. We saw nothing like that in Italy, Mr. Walpole."

"Not between married people," answers Walpole; "preserve that local distinction. But you remember that a good deal of something like this tender exhibition might now and then have been witnessed, not confined to elderly people either; assuredly not to ugly ones. The vast rooms and vast gardens of the Palazzo Ridolfi, for instance, might have been vastly convenient for amorous couples in search of such a convenience as opportunity: here the more limited spaces and absence of hiding holes possibly may render a *tête-à-tête* so difficult as to oblige persons to proceed with their offices of courtship somewhat in public."

"Yes, in our palazzo we might have billeted a battalion."

"Of billers and cooers," suggested Walpole.

"A battalion, without inconvenience; and London rooms feel as cramped as cupboards after them. But I am tired of Italian reminiscences. Let us change the subject."

"Yet the pleasures of memory are the only fruits of foreign travel for some of us," said Walpole, again mounting his eye-glass. "It has left no profit but that; nothing but the recollection of pleasant hours to fall back upon; in everything else disappointment."

The Countess turned very red, and looked at him: he was looking at the dancers. There was a pause.

"I understand Sir Thomas has increased the capacity of his house by having all the beds taken down, and the house, from garret to cellar, turned into reception rooms," she said in a rapid way.

"Treating his company *de haut en bas*, as Selwyn said this afternoon at White's," said Horace complacently.

"La! Mr. Selwyn. Is he still as bad as ever? and his jokes, I daresay, no better than they used to be either. What a life is his, haunting clubs and dozing over his cards! A wonder so sleepy a person can be so wide awake. Yet he has a fine fortune. What a shame he does not marry! Don't you think so, Mr. Walpole? Here comes Sophia. Sophia, here is our old friend Mr. Walpole, and as uncomplimentary as ever, for he says you have grown lean."

Walpole turned round with vexation in his face.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH SOME JUVENILES EMBRACE.

He was annoyed that the mother should have said anything to convey that he had been speaking of her daughter, that he was even aware of that superb young lady's existence at all, much less of her presence in the room. It was a nothing, but there are situations of the mind—rather, of the affections—when the buzz of an insect sounds like a cannon-shot in the delicate ears which are especially tuned to receive it. Walpole had been very polite and stand off, and indifferent—supremely indifferent—to everything concerning Lady Sophia Fermor, and it was of such importance that his petit-maître air should be preserved intact and should also be perceived by those beautiful eyes. He was standing on the brink,

daintily, tiptoe on the brink of water, as it were, but safe, without wetting the rosette of his shoe, and here the Countess had chucked him, rudely, knee-deep into the element. It was a humiliation for him; there he was splashing about with consciously unbecoming gestures. How was it possible to preserve a superfine self-sufficient smirk when this heedless or artful matron had made so reckless an exposure of the matter of his thoughts?

He was taken at woful disadvantage, and turned shyly as Lady Sophia came up, leaning on the arm of Lord Holderness, and stood presenting her hand. Did she attend to her mother's observation? or apprehend or care what his thoughts or feelings were or might have been? She was acquiring experience of the world already, and the sensations of other people were sometimes becoming a tiresome subject to attend to.

She had come in from the juvenile dancing-room, and was obviously out of humour.

"We have been looking at the juvenile dancers,"

she said, "my Lord Holderness and I, in search of a future belle, and find them but an indifferent collection: with exception of the little lady for whom the fête is given, there is not a remarkable face in the room. The Clubs of the next generation will have small call for toasts, as I said to Lord Holderness;" and Lady Sophia put up her fan and yawned in a most unbecoming fashion for the beautiful heroine she was.

"You forget little Lady Juliana," said Lord Holderness, with eyes that sought to attract a response from the beautiful ones hidden behind the fan.

"My daughter Juliana is said to be the image of Sophia there, the living image—the same nose exactly," said the Countess.

"Your ladyship must permit me to deny that," said Lord Holderness.

"Everybody says it," persisted the Countess.

"Then the world will be dazzled out of its wits by-and-by. I cannot think there is such luck in store for the coming generation as has fallen to our share."

Lord Holderness was a conceited coxcomb, who evidently had hopes of his own.

"About noses—I am a connoisseur in the rarity. There is no such thing nowadays as a nose. I have examined the collection in the room without discovering anything beyond the snub," said Walpole, recovering himself, all the easier because the fit of nervousness which had seized him was apparently not perceived by anybody. "Selwyn says he meets nothing but a snub on every lady's face that he looks at, and I feel like him to-night. On every face that one ventures to look at—a snub. And as for those faces where all features are perfect, one scarcely ventures to look at them at all," he added, simpering.

"Yes; one's modesty evidently prevents that," said Lord Holderness pertly.

Lady Sophia moved her shoulders; the necklace of amethysts and brilliants which her mother had purchased a bargain from Princess Craon gleamed in the rays of the chandelier as she stirred.

She was vexed, or tired, or out of humour; or weary of Lord Holderness, perhaps.

"How stupid there are so few minuets," she said languidly, addressing Walpole directly in a complaining tone. "How very ill arranged it is! nothing but country dance on country dance. Listen, they are positively playing 'Buttered Peas' again. Excuse me, Lord Holderness, I am tired; I shall sit this dance. I thought we should have had a minuet this time at least;" and her short upper lip curved as she rustled quickly down on a couch, and presented the back of her graceful head to the group with the haughtiness of a queen.

Lord Holderness, protesting that he was as willing to talk as dance, took a position beside her, and Walpole, standing pensively apart, opened his large eyes, an unconscious melancholy lurking in them as he looked at the pair.

He detected a vacant expression, a certain sadness in the beautiful face. A coronet *manqué* —a want of Lincoln—he translated it. But what

was it to him what she wanted? Then, as he continued to gaze, the old dangerous Florentine light beamed out from those eyes, and slowly in response the old feeling revived within him. It was a perilous moment. Perhaps he had misjudged her. She might not have been so bad, so worldly, as he imagined. A strange form of thought to find a resting-place in his mind! Then he saw that she had not indeed improved in looks, and that the fair clear features had lost their fresh burnish of happiness.

"La, Mr. Walpole, what are you staring at? You look as melancholy as the statue of Momus in the Florentine Gallery," said the Countess in a loud tone at his elbow. "And though he was the god of mirth, he had the saddest face I ever saw; and you resemble him uncommonly at present, staring at the wall."

"It was the business of Momus to satirise the ancients, madam: beware!" said Walpole, rousing himself.

"But he was turned out of heaven for it in the

end. He lost heaven and the society of gods, and of goddesses too, Mr. Walpole, because he could not practise the golden art of holding his tongue. Let that be a lesson to others like him. However, if Momus would turn round now and enlighten my ignorance, I should be his debtor. I want to know who everybody is, and as I ciceroned the god of mirth, or of satire—which is it?—in Florence, he owes me something in return. I have been so long out of the country that I scarcely know how to behave in public. Fancy, I caught myself breaking out in Italian to Mrs. Chenevix and Mrs. Dolby. Poor souls! it quite upset me to expose their ignorance in public. It was very inadvertent of me, and they looked so ashamed of it too."

"Yet in Italy your ladyship rarely spoke in Italian; Lady Charlotte acted as your interpretress —now very perverse!" said Walpole, peevishly. "However, I am ignorant of these islanders I have not tasted the horrors of home beyond a month. I conclude you present the young ladies on Friday, the Birthday?" and Momus surveyed the room

with an air as intentionally indifferent as was the affected tone of his voice.

"We may be so fortunate to as meet you there?"

"I do promise myself to kiss hands on Friday, but it is doubtful as yet; like your ladyship, I live in expectancy, and look out for an important arrival from Paris," he added tartly.

"I expect nothing from Paris, Mr. Walpole."

"You are the luckier for it, as I expect Lord Lincoln with my trunks and my Birthday suit, and lie awake o'nights guessing at the shape of it. Lincoln, you know, is expected, and promises to bring my finery. If he should disappoint for Friday, then his Majesty must bear with my absence. My taste is French, and I dare not exhibit my person in the work of an English scissors. By-the-way, if Lincoln means coming at all, I judge he had better come quickly." A pause. "My lord, yonder, appears on his promotion," added Walpole, glancing at Lord Holderness, "and I wish him, and your ladyship, and everybody else, joy of it."

"You always speak in enigmas; nobody can ever make out your meaning," said Lady Pomfret, looking hard the other way. "But talking of trunks—apropos of trunks—pray thank your friend for the trouble he had sending on our things from Florence. Thank him from me when you write. I hope he is well; he was very obliging."

"Mr. Mann? Yes. He wrote yesterday and he still laments your departure," continued Walpole. "He tells me Count Ugoccioni, Lady Sophia's poetical lover, is not at all cured of his passion, and as he must be occupied some way with her idea, he is composing a congratulatory ode on—on her *marriage*. Mann hopes the happy event will not delay, as otherwise the poem threatens to be as long as the Iliad, and whatever small stock of sense the count may possess will evaporate in its accomplishment."

"What beautiful eyes he had! I was fond of the count," said Lady Pomfret innocently. "The Ugoccioni are a very noble Venetian family; Froissart distinctly mentions the name. Froissart

says "—— added my Lady Pomfret, getting up her literary expression, and preparing for the display of a quotation.

But what Froissart said was never heard by Walpole, for at the moment a short pretty person, in the tallest of coiffures, trotted or toddled forward, as unsteadily as her high vermilion heels could manage. She was all over spangles, bangles, bugles, diamonds, flounces and pompons. From her sparkling beady eyes down to the enormous spangled rosettes of her short shoes, one amazing glitter and flutter. This was Ethelreda Harrison, the great Norfolk heiress, the original of Lady Bellaston in 'Tom Jones,' and Lady Tempest in 'Pompey the Little,' who had married Lord Townshend but who, to her exceeding satisfaction, was now separated from him.

"Dear, dear—dearest Lady Pomfret!" screamed Lady Townshend, with extravagant delight, seizing her friend by both hands. "How charming to have you back at last! Society has been quite snuffed out since your departure—vapid and

insipid beyond endurance. We want some one of parts and wit, with your fund of anecdote, to reanimate us again. Such a dull set here. My fan, Mr. Winnington; my smelling-bottle, Sir Charles. Dear! how glad I am to lay eyes on you. They said you were here, but I did not believe it, and have been seeking you from garret to cellar. These rooms are so numerous, so crowded, one might play at hide-and-seek ineffectually all the evening. I think I shall sit awhile. My Lord Mountstewart, fetch me a chair; but no, it does not become me, and you may carry my reticule instead. What! Mr. Walpole too! and fresh returned from round the world besides," continued her ladyship, with renewed enthusiasm, presenting her rows on rows of blazing rings to receive the pert acknowledgments of the smiling gentleman. "Mr. Walpole, malicious, charming as ever. My Lady Pomfret is the sun, and attracts the most brilliant satellites by her influence; quite a constellation of taste, fashion, learning, and belles-lettres in this corner of the room. If your tongue has lost any of its bitter,

talking Tuscan sweets to southern charmers, I will undertake to restore its edge again, Mr. Walpole," she added, shaking the fragrance from her pompons and laces as she ogled, grimaced and fanned herself, blocking up the passage of the folding-doors with her hoops and making Lady Pomfret conscious that she was being audaciously laughed at for the benefit of my Lady Ethelreda's perambulating escort.

For the little lady was a reputed quiz, and it was the only decent reputation which she deserved or took any trouble to sustain. Provided she was laughed with or at, and had a supply of young fellows following in her train, and plenty of women looking on to envy, it was all she cared about. The paint on her cheek copied no hue of nature; it did not pretend to deceive. She painted brazenly, as she lived, and Mrs. Montagu in two sentences records how the marchioness was then passing her time. "Lord Townshend is spitting up his lungs at the gravel pits," she writes, "and his charming lady diverting herself with daily rambles in town. She has made a new friendship, which is very

delightful—I mean with Madame Pulteney, and they hunt in couples from tea-drinking till midnight."

And how is my dear, dear old friend Sir Robert?" continued Lady Townshend, bringing all the battery of her charms, in a focus of fascination, to bear on Walpole. "I thought he would have been here to-night, and came quite prepared to recommence our old flirtation. He is, I hope, recovered?"

"He is so, but feared the heat of all this overcrowding."

"Sir Robert ill?" put in Lady Promfret. "I hope it is nothing serious."

"Oh! he is the better of his distemper," continued Walpole eagerly; "he was attacked with the sort of ague—the late epidemic; but of which, in spite of doctors and their experiments, I believe nobody died."

"Experiments!" exclaimed Lady Townshend; "no two of them had the same way of treating the disease. I wonder some Sangrado did not

suggest the old recipe of drinking hot water. One actually did prescribe tar-water, another bleeding, another starvation; but the most rapid cure of disease I ever heard of was effected in a lady of my acquaintance lately by the death of a husband. There! my Lady Pomfret, you look scared out of your wits; and the loss of your fine wits would be something to regret."

"Such a calamity as that would be far more likely to kill than cure, in my opinion," answered Lady Pomfret sententiously.

"That depends," replied Lady Townshend. "Some constitutions might regain health, youth, and vigour under the remedy, but every one has not, like you, the good fortune to enjoy a perpetual honeymoon; and you look so young, so blooming, Countess, you are such a perpetual spring, you must tell me your secret; you must, my dear. Upon my honour, I am determined to make myself look as well as you if any trick may do it, short—short of the remedy I have just mentioned," she added, laughing, "I stop at that. Do you use elder-flower

water, or rotten-apple water? or hartshorn and limes, or rosemary, or Gowland? But there is, after all, I believe, no cosmetic like happiness. Alas! that is a lotion one cannot always obtain the recipe of. But you are so very happy, no wonder you are beautiful."

Plainly the marchioness was quizzing.

"It is impossible for me to reply in equal terms of praise, I regret," answered Lady Pomfret grimly. "I have seen your ladyship look far better than to-night."

"And my eyes have been telling me the same thing, but—but couldn't you tell a lie as I did, just to say a civil thing for once, Countess?" said Lady Ethelreda, with a triumphant stare.

Mr. Winnington looked grave; he was one of the wits of the escort, but it also was his office to prevent the broad encounters which the wit of the marchioness sometimes provoked or invited. He was about to interfere with this object, but Lady Townshend interposed opportunely.

"After all, Countess, what does it signify how we

look? Our day is gone by. Men will never look at either of us as long as there are such handsome women as your daughters in the room; they are already the rage of the town and the toast of the Clubs. Lord Mountstewart and Sir Charles here rave about Lady Sophia, but I have heard many this evening admire Lady Charlotte; and she is more to my taste: so expressive, so intelligent; there is an air of intellectual distinction about her face that reminds me always of her mother."

"They are good girls," replied Lady Pomfret, receiving the thrust calmly, "and I value goodness more than beauty; though other people I dare say may not," she added, returning the stab.

"I belong to those people then, for I would a thousand times rather be handsome than good as an angel," said Lady Townshend, adjusting her Mechlin pinner. "Goodness! the boast of all mopes and noodles! A quality that any woman may acquire by trying for."

"Pity 'tis not the fashion for more ladies of fashion to try for it then Lady Townshend."

"While, from the highest to the lowest in the land, every one worships beauty."

"Not the highest, surely," put in Winnington, the peace-maker, "when one observes the German predilections of a gracious personage. How can good subjects worship beauty when it finds such small favour with his Majesty?"

"And the taste runs strong in the family, just as hereditary genius does in that of Lady Pomfret," rejoined the marchioness, still eager for the fray. "The Prince of Wales, like your ladyship, appears only to value the beauty of the mind."

"And besides, it is the only point on which his Majesty and his Royal Highness are known to agree," puts in Winnington.

"Family disunion is, unfortunately, unavoidable in the families of the great," observes Lady Pomfret, in the pompous ex-cathedrâ tone becoming to her erudition. "History informs us that there invariably existed jealousies and disagreements between reigning sovereigns and their heirs. All readers are aware of that.

Edward the Black Prince is one of the few exceptions to the rule which I can recollect at present: Froissart mentions as one of the great qualities of the Black Prince his loyalty and respect for his father."

"The latter quality would not have been perhaps so easy if the Black Prince had happened to have a certain Majesty for his father," put in Winnington. "Bah! there are fathers and fathers, as well as princes and princes. Can one conceive a certain nameless Majesty ever having anything like a Black Prince for son?"

"Or anything but a *black* prince suppose?" said Mountstewart.

"I'm for Carlton House," said Sir Charles Stanningly; "and deny that the prince is as black as he is painted."

"You in Pall Mall?" said Lord Mountstewart; "then we may hope for better things when the prince associates with men of honour."

"He has ever been partial to maids of honour." said Winnington.

"Hush, there are ladies present; you want to make me blush, Mr. Winnington," said Lady Townshend laughing, and taking his arm. "Lady Pomfret will hear you, and she is descended from a saint, a king, and a confessor—have a care!"

"But I understand that the scandal of the quarrelling between the two Courts promises soon to be at an end," said Lady Pomfret, with a prudish look round, and a short scornful gleam at the marchioness. "I understand that only this week his Royal Highness sent an ambassador to the Court to make peace. I have it on authority; and here Mr. Walpole can corroborate or contradict me as he pleases. Eh, Mr. Walpole? I have a presentiment that we are on the eve of family peace."

"Don't commit yourself, Mr. Walpole; beware! my lady is very artful: she will betray you to the prince—the Black Prince," said Lady Townshend, laughing with her shrill falsetto voice.

Walpole remained silent, then, bowing with mock gravity to both ladies, turned to George

Montagu, who opportunely passed by, and sauntered away with him from the group.

"That was a delicate question you asked; it showed your usual discretion, my Lady Pomfret," said Lady Townshend, recommencing. "A reconciliation between the king and the prince means nothing but the downfall of Sir Robert—a pretty inquiry to make of so dutiful a son as our handsome Horace!"

"Yet Sir Robert must give way; it is all over with both the king and the minister," said Lady Pomfret dogmatically, not addressing the marchioness, but the assembly at large. "Lord Carteret has got his faction together for the express purpose of pulling down Sir Robert, and Lord Carteret is admittedly the first statesman in Europe; he succeeds in everything he turns his hand to."

"'Tis an old die-hard; they have not half beaten Sir Robert yet," said Winnington; "giving anything was never a habit of his; and giving way to his enemies, to political opponents, least of all."

"He is fast giving way to the gout, though," said Lord Mountstewart. "I observed him at the levée: he is breaking up."

"He'll not break up the faster for anything the Carterets can do, though," put in Winnington.

"If he admits the gout, 'tis a sign there is not much the matter with him," rejoined Lady Townshend; "he is very artful and as clever as his son Horace."

"I abominate the son!" said Lady Pomfret; "he was one of our set at Florence; and we saw much—too much of him. He has insufferable airs and conceit, and upsets me with his lackadaisical way of asking questions."

"Yet he was said to admire your ladyship, or else perhaps it was some member of your ladyship's family," replied Lady Townshend smartly; "however, I find him charming: he is always laughing at me, and I adore him. Besides, he has hereditary talent, and Lady Pomfret must appreciate that."

"I don't believe in his father's indisposition either," continued the Countess. "It was the

presence of Lord Carteret he dreaded here to-night, and not at all the heat of the rooms. I have political knowledge enough to be aware of that."

Lady Townshend yawned undisguisedly. "Politics always make me so sleepy," she cried. "Are there not quint and basset tables upstairs? Can we have sixpenny pharaoh. Let us try. I have not seen a card since the night at Lady Bel Finch's, when I was ruined by you all. Sir Charles, we are going; clear a space through the doorway for my hoop."

"When both patriot and courtier sit down to the same pack of cards, I think your ladyship and Lady Pomfret might try the experiment together," said Winnington. "There is no such peacemaker as a round game. Shall you join us at pharaoh, Lady Pomfret?"

"Or let it be a game of brag, which the Countess probably understands better," said Lady Townshend with a glitter of her fan. "There is Mr. Walpole's pale face again, paler than ever, I protest. Mr. Walpole, do you join us? I wish you would,"

she cried, touching his sleeve as he moved hurriedly through the press by the folding-doors.

But he bowed and passed on. He had asked Lady Sophia to dance, after all, and she declined, on the plea of fatigue; then the next moment stood up with Lord Holderness—and Horace Walpole was making his way from the dancing-rooms. He left the house and turned into White's, joined a party at hazard in the card-room, and lost his guineas for an hour; then went home to Arlington Street, and sat down to his desk to finish the letter to Mann, lying open upon it. But he could only write on the one subject, and concluded his letter with a description of the scene he had just quitted at Sir Thomas Robinson's:

"There were many great beauties," he writes. "Lady Emily Lennox, Lady Euston, Lady Camilla Bennet, and *Lady Sophia Fermor, handsomer than all*, but a little out of humour at the scarcity of minuets: however, as usual, she danced more than any other lady; and as usual, too, *took out what men she liked, or thought the best dancers.* Lord

Holderness is a little what Lord Lincoln will be to-morrow, for he is expected. The supper was served at twelve : a large table for the lady dancers; their partners and other ladies stood around. We danced till four, then had tea and coffee, and came home. Finis Balli."

It will be seen that Walpole did not faithfully chronicle all his impressions that evening, nor accurately narrate the facts as they concerned himself. It was far on into daylight when he had finished his letter ; then he looked at his white face in the glass with a shudder. What an object he was ! But who was to blame ? Had he not wantonly brought it on himself? If he had been silly enough to come back again flickering round the old flame, then he had singed himself for his pains, and had only his folly to thank for it.

CHAPTER VII.

ESHER.

Presently Lord Lincoln returns to England; he arrives in time for the Birthday, after all; and on presentation at Court was fortunate enough to attract the special notice of his sovereign, who, contrary to custom, spoke to him for some time. The royal conversation was in French, and, pleased with Lincoln's accent, his Majesty pronounced him the most agreeable man in England of his age, and declared he should be made a lord in waiting at the first opportunity. Afterwards came other marks of favour; the king presented the young courtier to a very distinguished lady, who addressed him in a foreign accent. Lincoln, let us hope, was not indifferent to the honour, nor displeased with the impression which his face

evidently produced, for the German laundress—no, countess—said, "He was a bretty poy, and would make a sholly bortrait; je feux absolument lafoir votre bortrait mong ami, et je le garterai bien pour moy," added the lady in her arch French, her fat cheeks wrinkling into a tawdry grin. "You will surely make a vortune in any Court where bretty women have any influence," she added in the vernacular—a condition which obviously ought to have rendered his chance of pleasing hopeless on the spot; but Lincoln was careful not to express any sarcasm in his eyes as he gazed reverently on the Hanoverian siren, and the observation itself was remarkable for a length and appropriateness which the English of the royal charmer did not always attain to.

However, Lincoln's debut at Court was successful; he had won the approval of madame, and it was probably owing to the good favour of that ill-favoured mistress that the king consented to a cherished project of the Duke of Newcastle's to entail the dukedom on Lord Lincoln and his heirs.

His name was to be inserted in the patent, and the duke, never doubting that the affair of the marriage would be carried out, had paid sixty thousand pounds to Lord Vane, who was next heir male, to cut off the entail in order to secure the estates to his nephew. Lord Vane, being in embarrassed circumstances and childless, preferred a large sum down to the possible chances of a remote succession.

So everything was being arranged for Lord Lincoln's profit and advantage. Fortune seemed eager to devise new favours for him, as that tuft-hunting goddess not unfrequently does in the case of those who have been already surfeited with her gifts.

No wonder if he should have excited the envy of contemporaries of his rank, as well as the admiration of his own family, and that of the powerful connection which he was to acquire by the marriage with his cousin. As for the duke, the manners, dress, talents, taste, virtues, vices, even, of the young lord, were alike the burden of his

conversation and the theme of his praises; his pride in him was without bounds and, like all manifestations of feeling on the part of that great man, expressed itself in extravagance and absurdity.

"Not only uncle duke, but even majesty itself has fallen in love with him," writes Walpole, whose friendship for his former travelling companion had apparently cooled.

After a few weeks in town, Lincoln dutifully goes down to Esher, Henry Pelham's magnificent place in Surrey: it was originally Cardinal Wolsey's palace. The visit had long been looked forward to, and Lincoln was received with every honour, and with a cordial welcome. His affianced wife had grown into a graceful and accomplished girl, who, if wanting in the superlative attractions of Lady Sophia Fermor, was yet well endowed with personal charms. That her lover appreciated them is highly probable, especially at this period of his life, when smarting from a first shock to his affections. There is, perhaps, no medicine for sentimental pain like the balm of a renewed flirtation with a fresh

object. And very likely Lord Lincoln applied that skilful treatment to his wounded self. At Esher he plucked the lotos that grew in the old woods; he sauntered and dangled, and made soft speeches, and no doubt filled the whole hive of Pelhams with pleasure by his behaviour, and, as was natural, his appearance was as much commended as his manners and conduct were. That, as matter of course; for "handsome is that handsome does" was a proverb in the last century, as well as now. We admire the faces of those who make themselves useful or agreeable to us, no matter the shape of their features. So letters were galloping from country-seat to country-seat in our hero's praise. These chiefly in feminine handwriting, profuse in points of admiration and enthusiastic adjectives. One young lady, writing to her aunt in Kent, records triumphantly how last night she had country-danced with my lord; for though regarded as an engaged man, to be noticed by him was a coveted honour by marriageable maidens: ladies of all ages are of Fortune's sex, and smile on those on whom the sun is shining.

So the neighbourhood about Esher was set going to amuse the guest. There were princely banquets as well as balls. Surrey gathered its choicest blossoms. A couch of roses was spread for our hero—no wonder if he was pleased to tumble on it for a while.

Before him the board was spread with every luxury; he had only to extend his hand and help himself. Every favour, every gift that fancy could devise or caprice covet—save one.

How was it that he began to remember the one tree which bore the fairest fruit of all—that which stood in the midst of the garden, and which it was death for him to gather? Alas! grapes do not always look sour because they are merely out of reach. Better for all of us if there was more truth in that juvenile fable—that we took to heart the lesson of that wise fox of Gascony, and gave up coveting bunches which hang too high above our heads.

What was there in the old manor-house of Esher to make him think of Lady Sophia Fermor

again? He had much idle time on his hands, notwithstanding the racketing influx of visitors and the officious hospitality; much pensive wandering, when he was neither feasting nor dancing, nor making love, nor making make-believe love—shall we say?—to anybody. Yet dangerous memories did intrude themselves as he wandered through the corridors where the old cardinal had pondered and plotted, and traced out the outline of his greatness, and like him, perhaps, wrestled manfully with his conscience. There were moments when the echoes of evening were dying away, and the last flight of rooks settled in the drowsy elms, and grey twilight was falling over the grim old Tudor palace. What subtle influence lurked in that different scene to bring back visions of the scented gardens of the Ridolfi, with the Tuscan moon shimmering on the sweeping Arno?

Perhaps, if forbidden thoughts did arise, he stamped them out of his mind. He was yet a loyal gentleman, although a pampered lot had softened the fibre of his will and unbraced his energy. There

was little in him to stand against the strain of enduring temptation; he did not appreciate his own extreme weakness, and perhaps waited the proof of some great fall to reveal it fully.

While in this wavering and unwholesome mental condition he might have prolonged his stay at Esher indefinitely, if an incident had not arisen to divert his thoughts into another channel.

This was the arrival of a young lifeguardsman from town, Tommy Keats, a cousin of Lord March, an associate of Lord Mahon's, and also one of Lady Caroline Fanshawe's racketing set. Captain Keats was not that order of man which well-balanced minds admire; not quite an improving companion, perhaps; but he was lively, and full of anecdote, and altogether an agreeable person to find in a ponderous country-house; besides, he brought down odds and ends of news that were new and interesting to Lincoln, to whom the town, in a certain particular sense, was comparatively unknown. For instance—

"How there was a new opera, with Bettina to

dance, and Montecelli and the Visconti were to have a thousand guineas apiece; Amorevoli, eight hundred and fifty; how the prince and the old gentleman had had another row, and things were nearly as bad as ever again; and Nourse, the old blackleg, had cut his throat because Lord Windsor had refused to go out with him; together with many other items of an instructive or pleasant tattling character, did this young soldier relate in his naturally free and dashing manner. But it chanced that some of these details turned out to have a special and unexpected interest for our hero. One day, when in prattling mood, Keats inquired if my lord knew the Lord Lempster, who had lost a hatful of money to Stamer Foulkes of Farnley." And when Lincoln artfully inquired who this Lord Lempster was, Captain Keats became eloquent in his praises:

"He was a capital fellow, quite one of the right sort, who had a bottle of champagne to his breakfast, and played and lost as heavily as any man of his standing; quite free and off-hand with his money, for he had given two hundred pounds for a

foundered brown mare to O'Brien, who had just been made an Irish peer. Did Lincoln know O'Brien, or hear how Lady Townshend had congratulated him on his elevation? She said that every one was now an Irish peer; that they would be like Scotch lairds soon; and that she expected her fishmonger, who was a native of the same island, would sign himself Lord Mountshrimp soon. O'Brien did not mind. Lempster had given him the money for the old screw—all he cared about. By-the-way, Lempster's sister was by odds the finest woman in all the town. Had Lincoln ever seen Lempster's sister?"

"Lady Sophia Fermor. I have seen the lady. I met her abroad," was the frigid reply.

"By George! you never have," exclaimed Captain Keats. "Not this Lady Sophia, I vow. She a lady? she is a goddess, my lord, that's what she is. I can testify to it, for I country-danced with her at Lady Crambourne's. Ask Holderness and Dashwood, and they can tell you; though Holderness is said to be the favourite. She is to

be at Sir Thomas Robinson's other ball on the second of the coming month. We are all going. Are you? Holderness and Dashwood to make the running, and we outsiders, Lord Robert Sutton, Billy Churchill, and myself, to look on and envy them. I envy Holderness, I admit it, though not a marrying man myself. Holderness can give any man points and beat him for happiness, if he gets her to wife. Cleverish! sings to the harpsichord; bothers one with her Tuscan, French, and so on. Goodish hair, and oh, such a figure! nothing like it anywhere. Go to Vauxhall some night and judge for yourself. Don't take my word for it. She is there at Vauxhall, you can see her any time; she goes much in public. Take my word, there is nothing so good anywhere else. Ask Bobby Sutton about it; ask Holderness or Dashwood; see what they will tell you."

"I have never been to Vauxhall," said Lincoln, in an indifferent tone.

"Not been to Vauxhall!—not been to Vauxhall!" Keats opened all his eyes.

"Not yet. Horace Walpole promises to carry me there on getting back to town," said Lincoln, feeling ashamed of his inexperience before this little rickety, angle-faced, dissipated-looking man of the world, his junior by two years.

"Why not come there with me? I'll show you Vauxhall when we get back. What innocence! How delicious! But you know Walpole? he goes there often: we sometimes meet. The night before leaving town we all went together. And look here! Walpole goes to Vauxhall to see something on his own account besides. Dashwood and Holderness know what it is; they are wild jealous of him, and good cause they have to be, if I know anything of women and their ways."

"Jealous of Walpole?" asks Lincoln, bewildered, wondering how the fastidious Horace and this frivolous little man could have become associates.

"Jealous of each other and of him—both together of him; of him most, and good cause they have; just the conceited sort of man that women run after. Besides, he has been abroad, like you;

knows all about cracked china, the Italian names of painters, and modish things of that sort; is writing a book too, and dresses vastly fine. All the fellows choose their waistcoats after him. A prig, I call him, with his fine air and his spy-glass. I hate all these cleverish fellows; but, as I say, he goes to Vauxhall every night looking after the hair and figure like the rest of us. That is why Holderness and Dashwood are so wild. A foolish thing of Dashwood especially, he can't have any chance any more than myself. But you don't understand? Well, he is out of all his clever senses, then, about Lady Sophia Fermor. Lord! how out of the world you are not to know that!" exclaimed Keats, in growing amazement at his companion's dullness.

"Horace Walpole, do you mean?"

"Horace Walpole. And oh, you should see how caught he was the other night!—a nice affair—I must tell you. Lady Carry Fanshawe got him to join her party to Vauxhall—ours; the night before I left town it was. You know Lady Carry?—well,

you shall by-and-by. We all went off together; one party, you understand, but you should have seen the colour of Walpole's face when he saw the complexion of our set; he thinks so much of himself, he was on thorns the whole time. I laughed to see his behaviour at our misbehaviour. We were such a jolly party, he would have got away from us if he could; but Lady Carry wanted to have him out of spite, as Lady Bel Finch said that Lady Carry's set were something or other. At all events, it was a catch for her to have Walpole with her in the gardens, and having him, she kept him fast, to make a show, telling us all privately to be on the best behaviour we could, and so we were. Oh, it was the jolliest party! Lady Carry and Polly Pollard—Pollyfamous Polyphemus as she is nicknamed—both raddled as thick as the paint would lie, and as handsome as houris. We sallied out into the Mall, and came along in a squadron, picking up Lord March, Mrs. Beauclerc, and Miss Sparre by the way—a very jolly girl—the 'lost Sparre,' as she is called. I must introduce

you to the Sparre, as well as to Lady Carry and Polyphemus."

"You are very obliging."

"As we all sailed up the Mall together,* looking out for every frolic, who should come down upon us but my Lord Fanshawe himself. Lord! what a surprise! Then he repassed us again, as not quite sure that it was his wife, strutting by as stiff and solemn as a Cambridge don with his hat over his nose; Harry Vane and I choking with laughter; but Walpole was shy, and hung on the skirts of the party, as if he did not belong to it nor it to him, or notice anything odd. Then Lady Carry, making the best of it, called out to her lord; but he turned on his heel and moved away, as sulky as a ghost: Walpole said, as a ghost that nobody would speak to first. This when he had gone; for we were all pleased at getting so easily out of the scrape. Then we packed ourselves into our barge, the noisiest and merriest party on the river. But as Lady Carry again whispered something about best behaviour, we

* The original of this expedition is in Walpole.

hired a boat filled with French horns to blow us up stream; this was so inspiriting, that Polyphemus gave a little cough, and began to sing. Then she kept on singing like a linnet the whole time we were on the water. At last we debarked. To think that you have never been to Vauxhall! Talk about Rome and Florence! there is nothing in Italy to compare to it. We shall go together when we get out of this hermitage. But, as I say, when we debarked at Vauxhall, up comes a woman named Loyd, supposed to be married to Lord Haddington; and seeing the two girls following Lady Carry, calls out, 'Poor things! I'm sorry to see them in such company.' Wasn't it good? Whereupon the Sparre, who overheard, wanted March to resent it, alleging for reason that though she was fifteen, she had never seen a duel yet.

"March—a very good-natured fellow, you must know him—March seemed disposed enough to oblige her, but as we wanted supper, we got them to forego the pleasure. Then we made on for the booths, to have minced chickens and champagne,

when up comes Lord Granby. You know Lord Granby, Lincoln ?"

"He is a reputable character, I imagine."

"Then you don't know him. Granby ! Oh, he was very drunk ; he had come straight from Jenny's Whim, where he had dined with Lady Fanny, and left her and eight other women playing at brag. I said he was drunk. Walpole said it was all his marriage, of which he is wondrous sick, and at which he has been hiccuping ever since. However, it turned out that there was a special reason to upset him then, for the prince had invited him to Kew the night before, and won £1100, whereon his Royal Highness stopped playing and closed royally on the plunder. So poor old Granby was drinking down the affair. He was troublesome enough until we reached the booth and had more champagne, and Lady Carry began to mince the chickens. You should have seen her do it in a china dish, with three pats of butter and a flagon of water, standing up before all the people, the visor of her hat raised so that everybody

might see—looking so jolly and handsome, and laughing all the time while the chickens frizzled, and she stirred the spoon, and the whole stew-pan seemed going to fly about our ears. The people began to crowd in from all the neighbouring booths and gardens to see, for it was plain we were persons of quality, we were so ill-behaved.

"Then Harry Vane filled a bumper, and standing up before all the people, drank their healths in a mocking way. Whereupon, and all at once, the Pomfrets appeared right in front of us—the Countess, the beauty, another daughter not by any means a beauty, and some more. Their eyes followed the direction of all the other eyes towards our box. You should have seen Walpole's face then, to be detected in such company! He had been long since hiding himself away behind the petticoats of the Sparre, but when the beauty looked up, presto! our fine macaroni disappeared. Nobody could say what had happened to him. It was about three in the morning. Harry Vane and I laughed about it all the way home. Oh! we must have a

night at Vauxhall with Lady Carry. I will persuade her to send you a card next time."

"That is a tempting prospect," said Lincoln; "almost enough to entice one away from the seclusion of these pleasant woods and streams. Heigh-ho! I have been moping too much, and may trust myself in your hands to discover some variety. It would be a safe venture, I think," he added, laughing, "if one wanted a change from this rustic life of peace and plenty."

"We have Sir Thomas Robinson's on the second of next month," said Keats; "come there, and I'll show you this goddess. She is certain to be there."

At this Lincoln grew pensive, but ended by a sort of half promise to appear in town on the second of the month, vowing mentally that he would get away from Esher then, if possible to do it; but there were difficulties in the way of his escape which he did not underrate.

However, the intimacy with Captain Keats ripened. The young men were seen a good deal together during the day; and they did not always

separate, even at bed-time, it was said. There were suspicions of rack-punch and other horrors in the captain's rooms, at ungodly hours, and circumstantial evidence of debauch in red eyes and fevered hands in the morning. Such proceedings were novel in the establishment. Esher was a solemn mansion, in which specimens of the black sheep species had rarely been folded. Mrs. Bland, the housekeeper, said that a set of Mohawks like the captain and his suite had not desecrated the premises in her time before; and Lady Barbara Pelham had placed a packet of tracts on the guardsman's dressing-table, and in place of the Louis XV. clock on the mantelpiece, fixed an engraved portrait of the Rev. Samuel Hogget, formerly a clog-maker, but now the beetle-browed head of the New Connection Revival meeting-house in Redcross Street, Byngham Square. It had not much effect, however, either on master or man, as was proved by a scandalous and unhappy event which presently occurred.

This was what came out.

The captain travelled with a body servant and a brace of grooms; and it was disclosed that the former menial, or miscreant, for he was both, had audaciously taken Mrs. Cicily, Mrs. Bland's head maid, round the waist after supper-time, in the cross corridor leading to the buttery, and kissed her twice. Now this was a very particular case, as Mrs. Cicily was promised to the curate of the parish, and Lady Barbara, a pious and excellent woman, but a bit of a matchmaker and meddler, as benevolent ladies are prone to be, was making the match and trying to persuade the Abigail's uncle, the rich publican at Windsor, to give a hundred and fifty pounds as a fortune, for the good of his soul, together with the distinction for the family in marrying into the Church : a sum the old tapster could very well afford to pay, if he were only well disposed to do it.

Now Letty Tomkyns, the buttery maid, who had an eye of her own after Captain Keats's handsome young man, had seen the stolen kiss, and, naturally indignant, conveyed the affair to Lady

Barbara, who had a shock lest the publican should hear of it, and find an excuse for breaking off the match and saving his money.

There was a great fuss made, and Captain Tommy was called on to interfere, on the ground of general morals. It was probably the first time that Keats had adjudicated in the character of referee in such a suit, and no wonder if, from the novelty of the situation, his action was irregular, as events proved.

At all events, Wilmot, the culprit, pleaded the defence of intoxication, alleging as proof the smallness of the temptation; for, said this audacious spark, "It is evident that no man, except under the influence of liquor, would sin in such a case, unless a parson, perhaps, who didn't know the difference." In addition to the sneer at the Church, this was a way of saying that the maid was not kissable on her merits, which was merely an impertinence, as she was, in truth, a very comely young woman. However, the point once raised, it was said that the captain, in his character of judge, took

an opportunity of ascertaining the fact in person in order to decide it; and the upshot was that there was a greater scandal, and Don Juan and Leporello quitted the manor-house of Esher rather suddenly. Not, indeed, in sackcloth and ashes, but in the captain's new travelling coach, with a group of Cupids painted on the panels; one of the grooms trotting ahead as outrider, the other acting as postillion; and Wilmot, the shameless scamp, perched on the box and blowing on a twisty French horn as the equipage swept down the avenue.

However, Mrs. Bland had that quarter of the house fumigated, and the boards washed down with a disinfecting fluid, and all trace of the captain's wicked visit was obliterated; and Lincoln moped about without his pleasant companion, and found the hours longer than ever; though Lady Barbara was well-pleased to see him alone, as was indeed Catherine Pelham also, who had never admired the little guardsman.

Lincoln, however, had slyly arranged a meeting elsewhere with his new acquaintance, and shortly

afterwards he succeeds in inventing a successful pretext for escape, and posts up to town with all speed, where he immediately announces his arrival by appearing at his Clubs, and visiting several old acquaintances.

CHAPTER VIII.

AMANTIUM IRÆ.

Meanwhile Captain Keats returned to his congenial haunts, and all through Pall Mall and the coffee-houses gave the history of his recent adventures in the country. The captain was a trafficker in news, not a merchant, but a small retail-dealer in the article, and into such ears as were open to receive his trumpery wares he unpacked his travelling budget. Meeting the mother of Lady Sophia Fermor at one of the many fashionable houses which competed for the advantage of his society, he naturally began to recommend himself by repeating all the interesting nonsense that he could remember or invent; amongst other items, how he had but come up from Esher, and found my Lord Lincoln immured there: he was like the

wandering troubadour who had discovered Cœur-de-Lion a prisoner in the German baron's keep. Newcastle's unhappy heir he had found mewed up like a monk in a family dungeon in Surrey, where he was kept on bread and water, and racked and tortured, until he should consent to accept a moon-faced country heiress, that the Pelhams were scheming to wive him with. Like a true knight, Keats had made an effort to rescue the captive, and was in some hopes of succeeding in his charitable enterprise.

This revelation stunned the Countess, and the interest which it awakened, rather than the pain which it gave her, exhibited to herself that there were yet thoughts connected with Lincoln lurking in her breast. Her feelings proclaimed that she had not resigned all hope. Wherefore should she? A rupture such as had occurred was not necessarilly final; enmities arising from such causes were sometimes tractable. The quarrels of lovers were not always mortal affairs. But this Pelham project of marriage! The Countess perceived at

once that a union with Miss Pelham was the likeliest event; that the duke—the entire connection—would on every account promote it.

Strange that a thing so obvious had not suggested itself to her before. Now the extreme likelihood and the suddenness of the announcement coming together shocked her; and she hated the dapper little captain for having been the instrument which had dealt her such a blow; but he, with a happy and unconscious glibness, continued pouring out his flow of pert small-talk and gossip, until the Countess turned away and left him in the midst of his prattle.

However, Keats courted popularity with matrons in society, and looking for a better reception elsewhere, communicated the interesting features of his sojourn at Esher to several ladies in the room. To Lady Townshend amongst others, who came up to the Countess with a disconsolate manner, and eyes in which malice and bella-donna struggled to express sympathy.

Lady Townshend reminded her friend of an

observation of his Gracious Majesty, "that Lord Lincoln was the handsomest man in England, and that the handsomest girl in England ought to be his bride. "My dear Countess, if he ransacks Surrey through he'll not find the handsomest girl there," added Lady Townshend, stabbing her friend with that flattering sentence.

Then Lady Chetwynd, one of the Florentine set, hailed the Countess open-mouthed with, "What is this I hear about Esher?—and I telling everybody that Lord Lincoln was promised to your daughter, while all the time he has been engaged to his cousin."

Lady Pomfret went home that night a miserable woman. She perceived that while occupied with that ill-starred adventure abroad, while sitting at the game with her cards up as she fancied, all the world had been looking at its ease into her hand, and was now chuckling at her failure. The sympathy of intimate friends, the gaze of the whole jeering town were to be borne. What an ordeal for her to undergo! and all through her own fault. She should have better known human nature—his

nature—than to have staked so much upon a single chance: he was not one to risk his prospects for a sentiment; to choose for love when the winning colour of ambition was readiest to his hand. Lady Pomfret was as wise after the fact as many other philosophers are, and bitterly repented her indiscretion while tasting the fruits of it. It was little consolation to learn that, in point of beauty, Catherine Pelham was not to compare with even the plainest of her daughters; that small triumph could not cheer her. However, an unexpected event came suddenly to change the current of her regrets.

Lord Lincoln suddenly made his appearance in the world. The Countess saw him for the first time at a ball at the Spanish Embassy. He did not see her, he affected even not to notice Lady Sophia; but if he did not, his were the only self-denying eyes in the room, for all others were engaged in gazing at her then. Never had she appeared so beautiful. A group of admiring beaux surrounding her—the best men in town, famous dandies, misogynists who had never bent knee to

beauty before, were there telling their beads before her shrine, bowing their powdered periwigs.

When from a safe position the Countess ventured to steal a detective glance round the room, Lincoln had already disappeared; and later she learned that he had gone away with Keats to a supper-party at Lady Caroline Fanshawe's. It was perhaps a consolation for her to learn that this superfine gentleman had already at his entrance into the world become one of Lady Caroline's racketing band.

Yet Lincoln had done well; he sought to save himself by honourable flight from temptation. There are times when the most heroic action of a warrior may be to turn his back to the enemy. But heroism was always shortlived with Lincoln, and so the second ball at Sir Thomas Robinson's came round, and he went there again, although fully conscious of the peril which he encountered.

This time they met. He intended to pass her with a mere salute, but he spoke to her also in passing; it was but a word, yet she was troubled,

and scarcely answered; her emotion was visible to every one near. Then she left Mr. Dashwood's arm abruptly, and in a rapid way took a seat: she was deadly pale. Lincoln was beside her in a moment; he found a seat also, and remained there.

Mr. Dashwood had been promised the next minuet, and at this very inopportune moment ventured to remind Lady Sophia of his hopes; but she had done with dancing for that evening, and Dashwood, a conceited hidalgo, who dressed in dark velvets in harmony with his Spanish air and breeding, went off in a fume both from the lady and the house as Lincoln and Lady Sophia quitted the crowded dancing-room in search of a more congenial locality for a *tête-à-tête*.

"There goes your prisoner of Esher," said Lady Townshend to Captain Tommy; "he was not worth rescuing after all: he has only escaped from his country jailers to find a worse fate in town; it seems all over with him already."

When presently, in the discharge of her matronly office, the Countess went to search for her daughter,

she found her on the arm of Lord Lincoln. Her surprise and confusion at the sight deprived her of the power of speech and of presence of mind until she was revived by Lincoln, who presented his hand and addressed her, politely speaking of the heat and overcrowding, as if there never had been any misunderstanding at all.

Such a sudden and extraordinary turn of events had never happened in the experience of the Countess before, and there were bystanders to witness it: Horace Walpole on one side, and Lady Townshend on the other. It was an odd coincidence that Walpole should have been by at the meeting of the lovers. In his letter of this date we find:

"Lady Townshend told me an admirable story of our friend Lady Pomfret. Somebody that belonged to the Prince of Wales said he was going to Court; it was objected that he ought to have said going to Carlton House; that the only Court was where the king ruled. Lady Pomfret, with her paltry air of insignificant learning and absurdity, said, 'Oh Lord! is there no Court in

England but the king's? Sure there are many more: there is the Court of Chancery, the Court of Exchequer, the Court of King's Bench, &c.' Don't you love her? Lord Lincoln does her daughter. He is come over, and met her the other night: he turned pale when he saw her, spoke to her several times in the evening, but not long at a time, and sighed to me at going away." How Walpole must have grimaced at those sighs! how careful to note that he spoke to her several times, but not long! His envious eyes reckon the minutes, and his pen, like an electrical needle, indicates every expression of passion, every movement in the lover's progress. Here he writes again: "The fine Mr. Pitt is arrived: I dine with him to-day at Lord Lincoln's with the Pomfrets; so now the old *partie quarrée* is complete again. The earl is not quite cured, and a partner in sentiments may help to open the wound again."

Being once fairly rekindled, the old flame rises quickly into a blaze, and things had already progressed so rapidly that at a third ball at Sir

Thomas Robinson's—Sir Thomas kept the fiddlers busy that season—it was already necessary for the lovers to observe a certain degree of caution in their intercourse. On that occasion there was a special reason for it, as the great duke himself was among the company, and it was important not to awake suspicions: accordingly, a little comedy is performed, which our observant Walpole carefully notes down:

"Lord Lincoln, out of prudence, danced with Lady Caroline Fitzroy, and Mr. Conway with Lady Sophia Fermor. The two couples were just mismatched, as everybody soon perceived by the attentions of each man to the *woman he did not dance with.* It was an admirable scene." The "admirable scene" is another glimpse of Walpole's jealousy, which peeps out or lurks in every line that he writes with reference to Lady Sophia at this period; he cannot forgive Lincoln's return to favour. He has again come in Walpole's way in the affair, and he suffers for it: the rival never lifts his eyes off him afterwards, and his most

trifling peccadilloes are transmitted to posterity. Farther on comes the passage: "The ball broke up at three, but Lincoln, Lord Holderness, Lord Robert Sutton, young Churchill, and a dozen more grew jolly; stayed till seven in the morning, and drank thirty-two bottles." Even his share of the thirty-two bottles is accurately marked down.

No sooner was it certain that Lincoln had returned to his allegiance than the Countess began to assume personal airs becoming to her position as mother to the lady that Lord Lincoln adored: it was one of her defects to anticipate her fortunes in this way: she was very fond of eating her corn in the green, as the French say, and often did mischief by her impetuous greediness. The sun was shining again, you see, and the ambition of the Countess, which had drooped in the wintry weather, began to raise its head and revive, and expand its petals under the genial influence of prosperity. So she began to put people rather into their places in a quiet way, and even to weed out her acquaintances with some energy—

already! It was soon for that. She was sometimes blind to all but the most considerable people in a ball-room; she cut Mr. Dashwood point-blank, and told Lord Holderness that he was deficient in wit; which was indeed true, as he was anything but a brilliant young nobleman. Perhaps she may have divided some of this complimentary manner with Walpole also—very likely; for when in the giving vein the Countess did not always discriminate, and her vanity sometimes overran her discretion. At all events, whether because of his own disappointment about Lady Sophia, or of her mother's insolence, Walpole's bitterness becomes suddenly more virulent than ever.

"You have no notion how I laughed at the man that *talks nothing but Madeira*," he writes. "I told it to my Lady Pomfret, concluding it would divert her too, and forgetting that she repines when she should laugh, and reasons when she should be diverted. She asked gravely what language that was? That Madeira being subject to an European prince, to be sure they talk some European dialect! The grave

personage! It was of a piece with her saying, 'that Swift would have written better if he had never written ludicrously.'"

At this time also, Lady Pomfret gave her daughter private lectures on behaviour and proper sentiments, for close maternal supervision and careful maternal direction were, in the opinion of the Countess, indispensable to one in the position of Lady Sophia. The action of the mother, however, does not appear to have been sufficiently disguised or discreet, for Walpole notes that—

"Her schemes and plottings are the amusement of the town. The Duke of Grafton said they were like a troop of Italian comedians; Lord Lincoln was Valère, Lady Sophia Columbine, and my lady, the old mother behind the scenes."

But he is careful to mark the progress of the courtship in every particular; he is like a physician feeling the pulse and observing symptoms; and every circumstance bearing on the case goes down into his note-book.

"In due time," he writes, "Lord Holderness

came forward with an offer, and was refused; and Mr. Dashwood shortly after attempted his fate, with like result."

Both these gentlemen were marked down as dead birds to my Lady Sophia's archery, and henceforth declined from the scene. They had each selected the losing casket, and Jessica ushered them forth over the threshold of fair Portia's palace. Followed some less distinguished wooers, who shared the same fate—nameless dead—and then everybody retired, leaving Lincoln in his eminence alone. The hopelessness of any other suit was universally recognised. This was not only the general impression, but was shared by the friends and connections of the family. The news reached Lady Mary Montagu in Italy; she was cousin to Lord Lincoln; and in March 1742 she writes to Lady Pomfret:

"I am extremely glad to hear that your affairs are settled to your satisfaction. I expect Lady Sophia will be so very soon, if my correspondents in England are not much mistaken. I shall then have the honour of being her relation; and as I

have had a long and familiar acquaintance with her lover, both at Rome and Florence, I think he has uncommon merit, which may deserve her uncommon beauty, which I am told is the admiration of her own country, as it was of every other through which she passed."

Afterwards it is evident that Lady Mary was surprised at the delay of the marriage, as she writes again :

"Apropos of angels, I am astonished Lady Sophia does not condescend to leave some copies of her face for the benefit of posterity. It is quite impossible she could not command what matches she pleases. I am still of opinion it depends only on herself to be my relation."

Yet, oddly, these rumours seemed to excite no attention in the Pelham family. Lincoln's proceedings must have been known to them, yet there was no remonstrance. Perhaps it was prudence, perhaps shortsightedness. They might have known him too well to irritate his vanity by interference with his liberty, or too little to

believe him capable of jeopardizing his prospects by a serious imprudence. At all events they abstained from interference, and suffered those who were in the secret of the engagement to wonder at their ease.

However, Miss Pelham's extreme youth was a fortunate circumstance for all parties, most of all for Lincoln, as by preventing her appearance in society it saved him from the dilemma of having to pay addresses to rival ladies in the same ballroom. Yet he was sleeping on a mine that might explode at any moment. The certainty of a catastrophe was none the less for being remote, and at every fresh step he involved himself deeper. The temptation overpowered him, as well on the side of vanity as of passion, and either motive would have been too much for him single-handed. It was enough to turn the head of a lesser coxcomb to find that, of all the worshippers at this shrine of beauty, he alone was the favoured one; that for him only the portals of the sanctuary were open. Could he think that it was merely the Duke of

Newcastle's fortunate heir who had surpassed so many gifted rivals? It is the superb feat of getting beyond one's fellows which is the real charm of life after all; not wealth or pleasure, or rank. Lincoln felt that he must now ride on this race to the end and, come crashing past the winning post, happen what would after. The impetus was on him; it was too late to look behind or calculate what other consequences might follow. He was on with the new love, but not yet off with the old, and he had not yet, perhaps, made an election between the claims of new and old. So that with all his gifts of fortune, and his many successes, he must have had many an unenviable and uneasy hour of it. Walpole, still looking on, hazards an opinion of his own on his proceedings; at this time he drops the pithy sentence:

"I have seen Lady Pomfret lately, but I am sure Lord Lincoln is not going to marry her daughter."

But Walpole's eyesight was not clear on this subject; the wish was father to the thought with him.

CHAPTER IX.

DRIFTING TO WRECK.

While the gay world of London was occupied in its own way, an exciting political crisis arose in Parliament. The struggle for power between Sir Robert Walpole and his opponents had reached its height, and the utmost strength was exercised by both sides; debates eloquent and brilliant, pointed with sarcasm, were protracted until morning. Marvellous ingenuity was displayed by either side in plotting and counter-plotting, and the oddest devices were employed to entrap voters and surprise the enemy. Sick and dying men, patients blistered and swathed in flannel, were carried into the House on stretchers to assist the divisions.

On one occasion, three members, too ill to be

introduced any other way, were kept in readiness in Parliament Buildings, at the house of Sir Robert's son, the auditor of the Exchequer, to be carried into the House by a private door of communication when the division bell rang; but some of the other party, hearing of the project, filled the lock of the communicating door with sand, so that it was found impossible to open it in time to secure the votes.

Each side was equally energetic, and unscrupulous as to ways and means, and the heat of contest extending outside the walls of Parliament, began to permeate through the pores of society and infect every class of any importance in London. The notorious divisions at Court were aggravated by the conflict of parties; the influence of the Crown being on the side of Sir Robert, while the Prince of Wales, in person, solicited votes for the Opposition. Consequently society began to divide into partizanship, and each drawing-room of any note to select its political colour. There were Capulets and Montagues in the same ball-room, Court macaroni, and

Opposition fine ladies, who kept rigidly aloof in hostile parties.

One social inconvenience arising from the state of things was the protraction of the Parliamentary session. This was beyond all precedent. Families of distinction found themselves compelled to remain in town, and among these the Pomfrets. Week after week Parliament continued to drag on without question or hope of prorogation; the faster business was done, remoter the end appeared, until at length, losing patience and temper at the delay, Lady Pomfret packed up her family, husband, sons, daughters and all, and posted down to the family mansion of Easton Neston, near Towcester, in Northamptonshire. They were already settled in the country before the final crash came, when Parliament broke up, and Sir Robert, after holding ground against repeated majorities, at length gave way to Carteret, vanquished no less by the great ability and eloquence than by the overwhelming influence of his rival. Yet this change, although foreseen, took everybody by

surprise when it came; for notwithstanding the fall of Sir Robert, the Pelhams managed still to remain in power, and Mr. Pelham and the Duke of Newcastle became members of the new administration. This diminished the triumph of the achievement, and gave the whole affair the look of a compromise.

This success of the Pelhams would have annoyed Lady Pomfret if she had not been at the moment occupied with sore domestic troubles which fully absorbed her attention. These were of a pressing as well as of a personal nature. It was discovered that the family estate had been mismanaged in every way: tenants were in arrear; farms, woods, and flocks had been neglected; the man of business had grown rich; the steward had blundered; and as the feasting, travelling, and extravagance of the past two years had left the bank account in bad repair, it was not pleasant to find that the resources of the estate were also drained. But there were other causes of anxiety besides. Lord Lempster confessed to a few liabilities incurred under peculiar

circumstances; debts both of honour and dishonour, that, however, claimed to be discharged forthwith. It was a respectable list enough, considering his tender age, which the young gentleman disclosed, although he probably had not benefited his soul by an open confession of all his liabilities. Ultimately, it became a question of the sale or mortgage of a couple of farms, to take the heir out of his present difficulties; so that he had already contrived to poke some substantial plums out of the family pudding, and foreshadowed that career of extravagance which ruined him afterwards.

Great lady as she was, still, like John Gilpin's wife, Lady Pomfret had a frugal mind; and perceived that immediate retrenchment and a prudent revision of the estate, helped by a judicious shabbiness, would be necessary in order to appear next season in town with a restored exchequer. Accordingly, she had interviews with the agent and the stewards, organised a plan of retrenchment, and set courageously to the work of reconstruction. Certain turbary rights which the villagers had

enjoyed were withdrawn, and the mountain squatters—tenants at will—who had by their labour reclaimed a waste area of heath and snipe tract, were ruthlessly dispossessed and driven on the world. The crowbar went to work, and their humble cabins were levelled. It was like an Irish estate in modern times before—or possibly after—the passing of a great remedial measure by a conscientious statesman and a bullying majority. The local Bench, too, sustained the progress of improvement on the Pomfret estate in that free, round-hand-justice fashion which still prevails in that regenerated island across the channel. A vagrant woman, taken in labour by the roadside, had eaten some vegetables snatched from over the fence, and was, with her baby, sent to prison for a month—there were two parsons on the Bench—Carroty Sykes was set in the stocks for having whistled disrespectfully through his fingers as "my Earl's" carriage drove up the village street; and the village tapster was cautioned against permitting boozing clowns to comment on the actions of their lawful

betters. The "floodgates" were well-hammered down by the dispensers of Northamptonshire law—no danger to society from Radical turbulence in that quarter; and the Countess never troubled her head about village popularity if she could only make a guinea by screwing and scraping.

But, besides its business advantages, a temporary season of retirement in the country was useful in other respects. Lady Sophia required rest after the fatigues and excitement of the town. She was also anxious to have a few months' meditation in the old home of Easton. It might be for the last time. The nurseries and schoolrooms, gardens and terraces, which she had known as a half-formed girl, might never be seen during her maidenhood again. Who could tell what might happen in a short time? Ere another summer, perhaps, a very great personage, and the happiest of brides, might visit the old manor-house—the Countess of Lincoln in person. She had her own fancies on the subject, and, no doubt, private reasons for indulging them which no third person could appreciate. Also, re-

tirement at this particular season was sympathetic, and bore a graceful aspect from the sentimental side, as Lord Lincoln himself had been obliged to go into the country for a while. The duke had expressly commanded his nephew to a round of duty visits, chiefly among members of the Pelham family, and possibly with a view of withdrawing him from the influence of certain dangerous associations in town. Perhaps it was not judicious to hurry a hotheaded youth into the midst of a family which was beginning now to exhibit some offence at his conduct; but the duke's forte lay not in discretion, but duplicity; he was never at rest but when concealed motives were the groundwork of his actions. His delight was in subterranean labour. Sir Robert Walpole said, "The Duke of Newcastle has a foolish head and a perfidious heart: his name is perfidy;" and our Horace, on sending a list of mock receipts to George Montagu, puts down for "capital weaknesses" the Duke of Newcastle's true spirit of crocodiles, because of his facility of shedding tears at will upon every occasion. Yet he was an

exceedingly coarse actor, and never deceived anybody with his tears, or produced other effect than to exhibit himself as the caricature and the buffoon which he was by nature. But in the estimation of the Pelhams and of his own faction he was the greatest man in England; and Lord Lincoln especially had a thorough belief in the rectitude of his character and the distinction of his talents.

When, therefore, the duke proposed that they were to travel together into the country, the nephew readily agreed; and it was ultimately arranged that the latter was to remain at Claremont, the residence of the Orleans family in our time, until release from the duties of office should enable the duke to join him there: then uncle and nephew were to travel together to Nottingham, and visit the family estates, arrange about drainage, planting, reclamations, and other matters of business, until the setting in of the shooting season, when the earl was pledged to join a party in Scotland.

Perhaps Lord Lincoln was also pleased at having a season of retirement; a crisis in his life

was approaching. It was time, indeed, that he should pause and look into himself, and estimate at a proper value the many complexities of the labyrinth into which he had travelled. Had he truly made up his own mind at last, even yet, at the eleventh hour? Could he hit upon any way of reconciling his obligations towards each of the ladies of whom he was at once the recognised, if not the accepted lover? The thing began to be pressing; the time to choose was coming very near: a determination would presently be forced upon him—inevitably forced. He should be asked to redeem his plighted word, or to abjure it; to decide which of the two ladies he should forsake, and accept the conditions of his election. The house was on fire, and he had apparently no choice left, except to burn, or jump out of the window. Yet he hesitated. There are persons so placed who yet will neither save themselves by a spring, nor consent to be burned; who, under the approach of a certain catastrophe, will still find special reasons for neglecting to get out

of the way in time. Lord Lincoln, like all weak men, was inexhaustible at inventing excuses, and imposing upon himself with false maxims and arguments. In this special case he tried to think that he would act honestly for the future. The past was past, he could not mend that; but having been so unfortunate as to get into a difficulty, he would at least be straightforward and manly enough in getting out of it; that was the form of his resolution: but his manliness always came too late. It would have been intolerable to him to contemplate his conduct in the light which any third person should view it in: his was always an exceptional case; he was influenced by motives and feelings which no one else could appreciate; and under the special plea of these superfine motives he managed so to tamper with his conscience as to find a verdict of acquittal for himself. "Almost decided" was a favourite phrase with him; and he had almost decided, so extreme was the actual crisis, on casting himself on the affection of his uncle duke by

avowing everything, and seeking his direction or advice. This would have been a daring course enough—to confess that he had changed his intentions towards his cousin, that he was disinclined to consummate an alliance which the old man himself had already arranged, and regarded with extraordinary interest. But Lincoln was really far away from doing anything so straightforward and decided as that. When he perceived that in travelling with the duke many a favourable opportunity must arise for such a confidence, a host of excellent reasons came up at once to put the matter out of his head. He argued that the duke, worried by state affairs, and exhausted by the excitement of late political events, was not in a state of mind to receive so unwelcome a confidence. The old man needed rest to restore his declining health, and if suddenly subjected to a shock, serious consequences might follow. So Lincoln had a string of excellent ready-made reasons for holding his tongue. Besides, the mere pleasure of the duke was an important considera-

tion. The tie of blood was very strong in him, as in all of his race. The Pelhams always held together in social as well as political combinations, and this habit of cohesion was one secret of their great political success.

So from one motive or another Lincoln contrived to complete his tour without referring to his own affairs or attempting to discharge the obligation which his conscience held to be so binding.

The summer drew to a close, the shooting season was near; but before it came the Earl of Essex died, and Lord Lincoln was appointed Lord of the Bedchamber in his place, Lord Carteret getting the vacant blue ribbon.

Then came an unexpected piece of news. It showed that if he had beaten other rivals from the field, all Lady Sophia's suitors had not died of their wounds. Before leaving for Scotland, Lincoln learned that Lord Holderness had brought over a Dutch bride from the Hague, and the Hon. Mr. Dashwood had married Miss Ellis, a well-endowed heiress, with a tolerable figure.

CHAPTER X.

THE CURTAIN RISES.

In the height of the pressure of public affairs during the next season the king thought fit to get a bad attack of the Hanover fit, and what with the increase of business caused by extraordinary political complications, added to the caprices of royalty, urging expedition at any cost, ministers were at their wits' end how to manage. The king said it was intolerable that his personal comfort should be interfered with by state affairs; that in the interests of the English people, whom he cordially detested, he should be put out of his German ways which he adored; that he would not consent any longer to be the slave of his subjects or his servants; and finally, as an ultimatum, his addled ministers were informed that they would have to settle things with

Parliament as best they might, for come what would of it, the end of May would see the sacred person out of London. Walpole writes :

"Hanover is the word given out for this winter. There is a most bold pamphlet come out, said to be Lord Marchmont's, which affirms that in every treaty made since the accession of this family England has been sacrificed to the interests of Hanover, and consequently insinuates the incompatibility of the two. Lord Chesterfield says, 'That if we have a mind effectually to prevent the Pretender from ever obtaining this crown, we should make him Elector of Hanover, for the people of England will never fetch another king from thence.'"

Lady Mary Montagu describes the king as "an honest blockhead," and says that "Fortune, which made him king, added nothing to his happiness; only prejudiced his honesty and shortened his days. No man was ever more free from ambition: he loved money, but loved to keep his own, without being rapacious of other men's. He would have grown

rich by saving, but was incapable of laying schemes for getting: he was more properly dull than lazy, and would have been so well contented to have remained in his little town of Hanover, that if the ambition of those about him had not been greater than his own, we should never have seen him in England; and the natural honesty of his temper, joined with the narrow notions of a low education, made him look upon his acceptance of the crown as an act of usurpation, which was always uneasy to him. But he was carried by the stream of people about him in that, as in every other action of his life. He could speak no English, and was past the age of learning it. Our customs and laws were all mysteries to him, which he neither tried to understand nor was capable of appreciating." Every device was, however, employed to prolong the stay of his Majesty in town, and this was one reason why, notwithstanding the political interest of the period, the season was gay beyond all precedent. Walpole writes: "We have just set out in an opera, in what they call the French

manner, but about as like it as my Lady Pomfret's hash of plural persons and singular verbs or infinite moods was to Italian."

However, profusion in entertainments, prodigality and extravagance, especially in dress, had never been surpassed. Masquerades, which had just been introduced, afforded special scope for this indulgence, and became at once the folly and the rage of the aristocracy. These entertainments had been brought into England from France, for Paris then regarded London as a provincial town, a century behind in civilisation and luxury; and a popular poet makes the typical French fop inquire of the Englishman visiting Paris:

> "Has Christianity yet reached your nation?
> Are churches built? Are masquerades in fashion?"

These masquerades had been introduced by the celebrated Heidigger mentioned in the 'Dunciad,' and were first held at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket. Every precaution was taken to keep the company exclusive. "Persons of quality" were publicly requested not to lend their names to

obtain tickets, and when they had tickets to spare, to send them to the office in the Haymarket, where they would be repurchased; but, in spite of every precaution, the vulgar tide trickled in through the exclusive barriers, and the company became so mixed, that afterwards masquerades were given at private houses.

The king himself was present at an entertainment at Norfolk House this season, which in magnificence outshone the splendours of the 'Arabian Nights,' and for invitations to which there was as much plotting and interest employed as to obtain a place in the cabinet. In truth, one of the proposed objects of the ball was to amuse his Majesty, and keep him quiet for a while.

The duke squandered a fortune on the one night's display. The mansion was newly decorated for the royal visit. Eight hundred wax candles illuminated the ball-room, and also marked a surprising epoch in the progress of light; for at this period the dingy mutton-suet luminary was snuffed out for ever, and henceforth the vestal wax

alone gladdened our great-grandmothers' chandeliers. The streets leading to Norfolk House were impassable with the crowds assembled to see the company arrive; and all the leading tradespeople in London had been employed in the preparations. Even the stock in trade of the jewellers' shops was eagerly bought up, and the price of brilliants rose in the market. Franks, the jeweller, lent the Princess of Wales £40,000 worth of diamonds free of charge, on condition of admitting that they were his property. Her satin petticoat was literally encrusted with gems. What a royal advertising medium the clever tradesman had secured!

His Majesty was in excellent temper, and condescended to be pleased with all the arrangements at Norfolk House, although the prince and princess were also present; the princess in her blazing petticoat, frosted with borrowed splendour, must have been a trying object for royal as well as ordinary eyes, yet there were other guests arrayed with almost equal magnificence.

The most remarkable pair of masques were the

Duke and Duchess of Richmond, as Henry VIII. and Jane Seymour, "exceedingly rich, and both so handsome." Our eye-witness observes, Horace himself, as Aurengzebe, wore one of the most gorgeous dresses in the room. He does not admit that he had any interest in seeking to look his best upon this occasion; but, as Lady Sophia was present, we may draw our conclusions. Lady Pomfret and "my Earl" appeared the most absurd figures; with scallop-shell and staff, they trudged in as pilgrims; and my Lady looked as heated as if actually returned from performing a pilgrimage. She was not so heated, however, as to lose her presence of mind, or miss an opportunity of flattering a Royal Highness if the chance arose, for finding herself beside the Princess of Wales in the Long Gallery, she made a forward courtesy, and in her character of pilgrim, committed the mistake of taking the Princess for the Lady of Loretto, on account of her resplendent petticoat. When the king arrived there was a pause in the proceedings, and a momentary hush in the music.

Then a band of Faussans—opera-dancers hired for the occasion—came forward and danced an entrée. After which the dancing recommenced, while the king went about the room, and spoke to everybody. He was extremely affable, and Lady Pomfret somehow arranged to be among the everybodies whom his Majesty noticed. The maternal heart of that good pilgrim was in a continued flutter that evening. His Majesty had spoken to her; the august presence had brought tears—tears of joy—into her eyes by referring to the beauty of her daughter; vowing that Lady Sophia was the handsomest woman out of Hanover, and that old Newcastle's pretty nephew almost deserved his luck. His Majesty had a happy knack of saying wrong and awkward things precisely at the most unfortunate moment, and the wrong part of this was that a great lady of the Pelhams was standing by, and congratulated Lord Lincoln afterwards on the unlucky compliment. The reader remembers that Lord Lincoln was already a Lord of the Bedchamber, and quite

a royal favourite. At this ball he cast aside all prudence and disguise: either he was heedless or desperate, or perhaps intoxicated by the vanity of his position as recognised lover of so much beauty, or he had at last made up his mind and determined to brave his fate. He paid glaring attention to Lady Sophia all night; the pair danced together frequently, and were the talk, as well as admiration of the room. When they performed a minuet a circle of spectators gathered round, as heretofore in Florence: a circle composed of the noblest names in Europe. Lincoln was magnificent on that memorable night. No wonder if he provoked the admiration of royalty as well as the sarcasms of Walpole and George Montagu, who were looking on. He wore the slashed velvet doublet of a Spanish caballero, ruffles, plumes, and scarlet ribands to match. If his costume was not as striking as Walpole's, it was all ablaze with gold lace and jewels. The large diamond in his jabot was a birthday gift from Uncle Newcastle, and cost eleven hundred guineas.

Lady Sophia Fermor wore the dress and mantilla of a Spanish donna. It was the most becoming costume for her magnificent figure perhaps. But there was a deeper reason for the selection. George Montagu pointed out that these dresses must have been chosen by arrangement between the lovers, and that the similarity of costume was a device for proclaiming the nature of their intimacy to the world. Walpole was impressed by the remark; he felt at once that he was hopelessly eclipsed by this dazzling caballero; and the gorgeous Aurengzebe crept into his chair that morning in an envious and discomfited mood, perhaps the most melancholy masker that quitted Norfolk House.

But though the season and its gaieties were then at their height, there came a sudden change. Shortly after the Norfolk masquerade Walpole thus records the immediate desertion of the town:

"There is nothing left in town now, but a dozen antediluvian dowagers, whose carcases have miraculously resisted the wet, and who every Saturday compose a very reverend catacomb at

my Lady Strafford's. She does not take money at the door for showing them; but you pay twelve-pence apiece under the denomination of card-money. Wit and beauty, indeed, remain in the persons of Lady Townshend and Lady Caroline Fitzroy; but such is the want of taste in this age, that the former is very often forced to wrap up her wit in plain English before it can be understood, and the latter is almost as often obliged to have recourse to the same artifices to make her charms be taken notice of."

The cause of this desertion of the capital, and termination of the riotous amusements of the season, was that the king had grown insufferably tired of his amusements, and effectually put an end to the remonstrance of his ministers by forthwith removing himself and his Court to the Elysium of Hanover.

Lord Carteret, as minister in waiting, had no excuse for escaping attendance, and had to go with him, as had Lady Carteret, who, however, made every possible resistance to the expedition.

Lady Townshend said that the poor lady cried

a basinful every morning at the idea of quitting town in the meridian of her glory, and that between the hysterics of his wife, and the black looks of the king, my Lord had not a pleasant time of it. However, the Court and Carterets departed, and the town emptied itself rapidly afterwards.

In the first flight to the country was Lady Pomfret and her brood. She had bidden a long array of guests to visit her at Easton Neston, and this time her mind was bent on doing great things down in Northamptonshire. It was to be open house now. The shabbiness of her former visit was to be atoned for by magnificence and profusion : and this for a special object. Lord Lincoln, she reckoned, had taken steps from which there was now no return. He had especially committed himself at the Norfolk House masquerade, and his tedious wooing must be brought to a close at last. Non-intervention on a mother's part might be sound doctrine up to a certain point, but, as in other dogmas, you should not ride a principle to death. Delicacy on the part of a girl's family was all well enough in its way ;

but there might be occasions when a mother's duty should make her blunt—direct in her action, and decisive. What was the use of maternal supervision at all if a mother was not to act at a critical juncture like this? A general's office is to combine and to command; also to lead a charge, and expose himself to the enemy's bullets in emergency, and Lady Pomfret had never hesitated to go under fire when occasion required it; her fault was rather in the direction of rashness, to carry things high-handed by an assault or a *coup-de-main*.

But here Lord Lincoln had for the second time amused himself by playing a variety of airs on that very delicate and finely-toned instrument her daughter's affections; in public, too, before a critical audience of spiteful and jealous connoisseurs. Was this sort of concert to go on for ever? Was there to be no second part to the programme? Must the mother stand by with folded arms, until he had jilted her beautiful child for the second time?—now that his attentions were matter of public comment, that the king himself had referred to the subject, and

the whole Pelham family were awakening to the danger.

Things had surely gone far enough. If the Countess had been indiscreetly energetic before, and done mischief by premature action, that was no argument for falling into the opposite fault now. However, to be sure of her ground, and avoid the possibility of an accident, Lady Pomfret took soundings beforehand as it were; she cast the lead into the depths of Lord Lincoln's affections, and made sure that she was in deep water first. She proceeded by very delicate and minute approaches, until convinced that it was safe to step forward. Like a skilful practitioner, careful of the patient's nerves, she fingered his pulse and soothed him by innocent or flattering phrases to divert his mind from the fear of a surgical operation.

She got him to lie back in that terrible dentist's pillow, as it were, and slipped her treacherous arm about his neck in an insidious embrace, but only to obtain a better grip of the victim, and in the other hand, behind her back, the familiar instrument

with the cotton wadding was safely clutched—the horrible forceps of matrimony—ready to plunge into his throat.

She did plunge it in. She invited him down to her country-seat—it was the same thing as if she had asked him to marry her daughter—and he had accepted the invitation. It was a way of committing him irretrievably. The world, the Pelhams, the duke, would have to notice it if he came to Easton Neston, and he was promised to come there.

Beyond that step there was nothing needed but an opportunity of making a formal offer to her daughter, and at Easton Neston opportunities would abound.

It was a spacious mansion, of a rambling and doubtful architectural character; gables, turrets, antient stone carvings, and modern plaster, all jumbled up together. Inside there was a baronial hall, wainscoted with oak, furnished with suits of Flemish armour and Roundhead helmets, with bows, spears, arquebuses, and the like, lying about on every side—the Countess had sent them all down

specially from town; and through the house were rambling galleries and corridors of the same florid and versatile taste. There were state-rooms, newly dressed in modern damasks and gilding for the more important of the expected guests, and other state-rooms which were only shaken up a little, and left in their original garniture of stiff-backed chairs, settees, and narrow mirrors of Venetian glass, which gave back a grim and spectral reflection to the gazer's eye. These were for the make-up of the company, the insignificant crowd who in the approaching entertainment had no special part to perform.

Outside there were spacious gardens and shrubberies, with meandering walks, and quaint enclosures of beech hedge clipped into fantastical shapes, with grottoes and bowers and nooks already fit for lovers to whisper and dally in. A line of elms and beeches where the rooks cawed framed in the shrubbery, and also enclosed a bowling green, where, in fair weather, Lord Lempster enjoyed his daily pipes and ale.

In front a broad sweep of undulating lawn declined to the water-meadows bordering the river, the antlers of deer peeping under the shadows of the elms. The prospect was fine; well wooded, picturesque, English. By the house there were ranges of terraces, one above the other, and in the best taste of the time; the Countess had herself planned the structure, and spent a considerable sum in carrying it out. These had carved balustrades of stone, heavy and ugly enough of themselves, yet harmonizing in a certain sense with the sombre character of the general architecture. Besides, these terraces had a special object to serve, for disposed at intervals along their spaces, lining the front and east side of the house, was the famous collection of statues known as the "Arundel marbles," the gem of Easton Neston, and great feature of attraction in Northamptonshire. By a bizarre fate these statues had fallen into the hands of the mad John Lord Jefferies, Lady Pomfret's father, and through her had found their way to the family seat.

The Countess had grown up among these statues; she was fond of telling how they were connected with every reminiscence of her childhood; how her own artistic tastes had been formed by their early contemplation; also of boasting of the price they had originally cost, and of the still greater money value which they represented at present. There were some noseless goddesses and toeless gods among this marble society, but as taste went, the collection was all the more valuable for being something fractured up and down; it helped to convey the impression and spirit of the true antique. Lady Townshend wondered that the Countess did not turn these statues into ancestors right off, as she had done the portraits which lined the walls of the picture gallery, and tapestried every available span of wall-space there. Fermours, Fermores, and Fermors, whatever they were—one never reached the end of the series with their arms, crests, and devices enamelled in brilliant colours or sculptured on tablets of various English marbles. Walpole said that the Countess had swindled the Jew

picture-dealer at the Hague, from whom she originally purchased this set of ancestors, and that their merit as works of art was exactly on a par with their authenticity as portraits; but he was always prejudiced and unkind.

Amongst them was a full-length effigy of our sainted progenitor King Edward, from whom her Ladyship had taken so much pains to descend. The royal confessor had not much of a royal or religious air, as he strutted with a finical self-satisfied smirk, in a well-rounded silk stocking and a Louis XIV. costume.

Beside him were the two queens from whom my Earl and the Countess had respectively descended, l'Allegro and il Penseroso: the one a flighty-looking little person in a brocade skirt, the other a sour-visaged dame with a rosary at her girdle. They did not belong to the same school of art, and probably had not been purchased at the same warehouse; but opposite them, and quite out of view, in a shady corner formed by the conflicting cross lights of the vestibule, was a

remarkable picture; first, because it was what it professed to be, a genuine Holbein, and next, an authentic kitkat portrait of a real personage and bonâ-fide ancestor, Thomas Fermour, merchant of Calais, the real founder of the house—lean, yellow-bearded, sober, grim of visage, with clear frontal bones, thin determined lips, and an earnest grey eye.

He it was who first acquired the estate of Easton, and lost it afterwards by confiscation, temp. Henry VIII., for his adherence to the old faith, and a contumacious overt act of treason in giving aid to a fugitive priest. Under Edward VI., however, his manor was restored again, with a considerable portion of the lands, and continued in possession of his descendants. Lady Pomfret had small love for this mean-looking Thomas Fermour, with a face like a parish clerk, as she said, mocking at the picture. She had originally sent him away from the town-house to rusticate at Easton, and would have banished him altogether to the lumber-room, but for a sturdy prejudice which "my Earl"

exhibited in his favour. Lord Pomfret rarely crossed her in any arrangement, but when he did interfere he was very obstinate. Her husband was not aspiring enough, the Countess complained; he was deficient in ambition; his spirit wanted raising; and as her only receipt for raising his spirits was to keep constantly putting him down, she managed fairly to prevent that he should ever have his own way in anything.

And so everything is arranged and prepared for the festivities at Easton Neston. The upholsterers and decorators have all departed, leaving an odour of paste and varnish behind which still overpowers the cut flowers in the reception rooms. Hampers of bronzes and old china, and other objects of art and interest, have been slyly brought down from the drawing-room in town to assist in modernising the Northamptonshire rooms. Amongst these a few copies of the Froissart and Vandyck, which accidentally find their way to boudoir tables. If two or three guests wished to enjoy the recreation of reading these works at the same time,

there are copies enough to hand for all of them. Outside, the gardens are trimmed to the highest point of neatness, everything is proper to receive the guests, who presently begin to arrive. Files of carriages, ladies of ton, fine gentlemen, attended by suites of menials as fine and difficult to please as their betters—a garrison of fashion—takes possession of the place. The village ophicleide and clarionet in connection with the charity schools, supplemented by the shoemaker's fiddle, had been chartered to play up a triumphal march on the day when Lord Lincoln drove through the street; the band was afterwards mobbed on account of the unpopularity which the family had acquired by way of the local land question. Besides, the village doctor had arranged a triumphal arch across the street with an appropriate motto, and Poins, the forester, organised a bonfire on the lawn, which would have probably been very successful only for the torrents of rain which fell and quenched it.

So the old house was filling in; drones and locusts crowded the servants' hall; it was one scene of waste and profusion everywhere. With all her thrift, Lady Pomfret was indifferent to expense when it came in the way of business, and was a means to an end. Though trifles might have displeased her, it did not signify; if she grumbled at all, it was in private. It might for instance have been difficult for her to understand why persons like George Montagu, who had no important part to play, and were merely invited to give an air of nature to the serious proceedings, should choose to travel with almost as strong a retinue of horses and servants as the Hamlet of the play, my Lord Lincoln himself, and with a larger one than even Mr. Pitt of Warrender, who stood in the second place to Hamlet, and ranked as the reputed admirer of Lady Charlotte. There was, so far, an inequality in the cast of the company; a disproportion on the part of the comparatively insignificant Montagu. Mr. Pitt would do well for Lady Charlotte, as well as

Lord Lincoln for Lady Sophia. Lady Charlotte, a lesser beauty, was not of the same commercial value as her elder sister, and the Countess, never unreasonable in business matters or unpractical in her anticipations, looked for no more than a fair trader's bargain for her wares in the open market.

Moreover, George Montagu had brought his sister Harriet, and Mr. Winnington made one of the party in their chaise. These friends were not quite expected, and as others followed from whom apologies had also been reckoned on, it followed that the old Hall was soon crowded to the roof-tree. However, people were then more easily pleased on the score of accommodation than in our day; the Countess took no extraordinary pains in housing any but the leading personages, and these were billeted strictly in accordance with the place which they held in her good opinion.

For instance, my Lord Lincoln had scented flower-pots in the bay window of his dressing-room, the silken hangings of his bedchamber gave out

an odour of cedar-wood, the carpet of his dressing room was soft as mown grass, and the walls twinkled in freshest white and gold. From the windows was a vast landscape up the vale, winding water and sloping woods; an ivy-mantled tower marking the middle distance, blue hills beyond—all the best features of the park. Mr. Pitt of Warrender was as well placed on the east side as Lincoln on the west; and so on, from lords and ladies downward, or rather upward, to Mr. Winnington, who was housed near the slates. Mr. Winnington, though a man of fashion, was notoriously *not* a marrying man, and the Countess observed confidentially to the housekeeper that if such people did not like their quarters, they might change them at the shortest notice.

And so everything is in its place and ready for the comedy to be performed in the old manor-house by Towcester. The orchestra finishes the overture, the bell rings, the curtain is presently to rise, when the pantomime will proceed. Valère and Columbine may dance an entrée before the foot-

lights; clown and pantaloon perhaps tumble, by way to distract the attention of the audience; while safe in the prompter's box my lady mother sits deftly working the wires. She was at this time indefatigable, and in person superintended every detail of the management. My Earl was commanded to abstain from turnips and subsoiling in his conversation, and Lempster from meridian potations. Her business eye never closes. The music or party of commerce in the drawing-room sometimes prolongs itself until morning, but my Lady never quits her post. The weather is fair and propitious, and every chance and opportunity is to be availed of by her. A resplendent edition of the Froissart lies open on the table in the state drawing-room, gala finery is uncloseted, and from Paris a fresh trunk of fashions has just arrived.

There is no time for repose; sleep rarely comes to her speculating pillow: she may not pause "to knit up the ravelled sleave of care." Often she watched the midnight stars, tortured with pains of

hope and speculation, as Macbeth might have done while the royal Duncan slept overhead. Two stupendous matches reposed in false security beneath her roof-tree, and it needed but courage—a skilful stroke perhaps—to despatch their unprotected bachelorhoods. How she coveted this spoil! Oft in the stilly night did my Lady Macbeth clutch at the mystic daggers, and hunger to commit this tempting double murder.

CHAPTER XI.

EASTON NESTON.

Although the habits of the period were early, people rose late at Easton Neston. The breakfast hour was sometimes far advanced into the forenoon, as the arrangements of the household permitted absolute freedom in this respect. Visitors therefore did as they pleased, and those who were not of sufficient importance to be selected as objects of particular favour by the hostess, or had not to undergo the annoyance of her personal attentions, found the house a pleasant one.

It was a sunny breakfast-room on the south side. Through the deep mullioned windows came glimpses of the park, the river streaking through the trees, the lawn speckled with deer. The walls had been painted in panels by a wandering Italian

artist, who brought a letter from Count Ugoccioni to Lady Pomfret. The Italian was starving, and the Countess made an excellent bargain with him to decorate her rooms at a trifle beyond the price of his keep and the cost of the colours. So the Northamptonshire sunbeams played on walls gay with mingled roses, doves, and Cupids—compositions copied from the walls of villas at Tivoli. The board was spread with silver plate; flagons and épergnes, glistening amid the breakfast equipage, mingled prettily with monstrously ugly vases of china and alabaster stuffed with flowers; the chairs and sofas bright in silk and brocade upholstery, were strewn with scarfs, mantles, lace falls. The rays refracted from the doves and Cupids played on these feminine accessories, which the ladies had cast aside on descending from their chambers, and on the hats and swords of the gentlemen scattered about in graceful disorder. The ladies were dressed in morning *négligées* and fresh *demi-toilettes*, which cost as much pains and care as if they had been for some famous

parade day at St. James's, and not a quiet scene of quasi rural life. Mr. Winnington sneered at the elaborate carelessness of these costumes, he was himself the greatest fop of any, for all his dumpy figure. Some of the gentlemen were frizzled up and padded to as high a point of finish and millinery as the ladies; so that for all the late breakfasts the menial population was astir at an early hour. The valets and waiting-women had no sinecure of it, and we may be sure that Lord Lincoln's foreign gentleman, Alphonse, had no idle time to spare. Lincoln had a weakness for fine feathers, and came down into Northamptonshire with as well-assorted a wardrobe as if he had been going to wait at Court, instead of coming to a country-house to wait on a lady who was very graciously waiting for his proposal, and who, *cæteris paribus*, would probaby have accepted him in a mulberry suit, a plain sword, and not a dust of powder in his hair. If the necessities of the case only were to be provided for, Monsieur Alphonse might have rested with his hands

idle, and left his curling irons in town behind him.

Opening the letter-bag at one of these late breakfasts, Lord Pomfret startled the company by a sudden exclamation of surprise. "Sad, sad news from Hanover!" he cried out. "Who would have expected it? So unforeseen! At Hanover, too—among strangers, away from all assistance."

"His Majesty—an accident to His Majesty?" exclaimed several voices.

"Not so bad, heaven be praised; not so bad as that," answered Lord Pomfret in a frightened voice, looking at his wife. "His Majesty continues to enjoy excellent health, and to enjoy himself, I trust, at Herrenhausen; but poor Lady Carteret! she has died, quite suddenly it would appear with scarcely an interval of illness, poor lady! And stay! a tissue of calamities. Lord Wilmington is also dead. Poor old man! in his case death was to be expected, and may be regarded as a relief; but poor Lady Carteret!"

"It was an unlucky hour for her when my Lord

came into office," said Lady Pomfret, after a becoming exclamation of grief and a proper pause, in deference to the general sympathy. "She would be alive now but for her ambition. Since the elevation of my Lord, she has been always on the strain, in a perpetual worry and fever. I am very sorry for her. At Hanover, too. Poor lady! and she was so reluctant to go there at all. Fancy having to die at such a place, so much out of the world, and surrounded, too, by Germans! I should not like to die there."

"But imagine having to live in such a place, madam," said Mr. Winnington.

"It only shows how little reliance we should place on anything in this world," said Lady Pomfret, grimacing morally with her eyes in her teacup. "What, after all, are its vanities, its pleasures, ambitions? Here to-day, and to-morrow we are not. Creatures of an hour, like the grass and the lilies of the field!—Sophy! that is my Lord Lincoln's teacup.—Passing by like shadows on the grass; and when passed, forgotten. Poor Lady Carteret! I am

truly very sorry for her! But she carried her head so high, so very high, that I always thought it could not last. People cannot have it all their own way in this world. With her husband first minister, and her daughters making such splendid matches, I knew that it was too much—that such prosperity could not endure. Indeed, it always seemed to me that she quite lost her senses from the moment Lord Carteret became Premier."

"It was very strange that Carteret, with his personal unpopularity and uncivil manners, should have succeeded to power," said George Montagu; "surrounded, too, by enemies as he is."

"But stranger still that he should have married his wife; and, of all other things odd, that she should have married him," answered Winnington.

"No! the really strangest thing was that poor Lady Carteret should come to die before the old dragoness her mother-in-law," smartly rejoined Lady Pomfret. "She was the bane of her life. The dear departed creature was never at any time mistress in her own house, no more than the housemaid was."

"Lady Carteret always wore mighty pretty clothes, however," said Miss Montagu, "and was very charitable and good-natured."

"Yes, she certainly dressed fine," replied the Countess. "I remember at the first drawing-room after the Coronation she wore green and gold, and such prodigiously handsome clothes that the queen herself commended them. Lady Carteret was always inclined for extravagance, if the mother-in-law would have suffered it; but the old beldame would not, and the daughter-in-law had to give way. Poor woman! she had her share of trouble in this world, and her own share of enjoyment also. She was at one time, if not handsome, undoubtedly fresh and comely, and had exceedingly winning manners, with a fair neck and shoulders."

"La Reine est morte, Vive la Reine!" exclaimed Winnington. "Carteret, though past his teens, is a promising youth, and still susceptible to the spark of love. There is now a first minister's ladyship, as surely as a first lordship of the Treasury, to let, and here comes my breakfast.

Ah? Ah, lampreys stewed in lobster! the dish which I adore," cried out the little man, tucking a napkin under his double chin and over his point de Venise, as a frizzling dish was placed on the table. "A first lordship and a first ladyship. I wonder which will be filled in first," he repeated, plunging his ruffles into the tempting stew. "Capital! a breakfast for an abbot. I'll back the ladyship, if Carteret takes it into his head: he was always a man of action. No wonder if you are all excited at such a prospect of promotion," he added, in reply to the feminine exclamations which greeted this assertion. "Perhaps there is some one actually in this room to whom the news of this morning may bring high promotion, I wish her joy of it."

A beautiful horror shot at him across the table from the eyes of Lady Sophia Fermor.

"It's all very well to say no, but wait till somebody is asked," continued Winnington, his mouth full of eel-pie. "I wish somebody would tell me that the greatest lady in the land was going to

take a fancy to me, and raise me to the first rank in England. I don't think I would scorn the prophet."

"The greatest lady in the land is Lady Granville, my Lord's mother. You would be a well-assorted pair," said George Montagu, "and I hope it may happen, for your sake."

"I'll lay you on the lordship first as against the ladyship, Winnington," said Lord Lempster, roused into attention by the prospect of a wager.

"Poor Lady Carteret was certainly raised to a very high position," continued his mother, primly resuming the thread of her monologue. "But the sad death of her daughter, Lady Weymouth, was her first warning, and a severe blow. I should myself feel greater sorrow at the loss of one of my children than the greatest elevation in life could bring me of joy. Indeed, I have had experience enough that a high position does not always satisfy the heart. I was sufficiently intimate with her late lamented Majesty to be aware of what the happiness of eminence comes to mean, but every one has

not equal strength of mind, and many are seduced by the glitter of the thing. It was ever my opinion that success had turned the heads of all the family of Carterets. The poor lady was not a little vain at forming part of the Court in Hanover, naturally being new to Court life, and not wearied by its intolerable restraints, as I have been half my lifetime. But with more experience she would have understood that the royal coterie at Hanover does not deserve the name of a Court. Court, indeed! Fancy such a thing possible without a queen! But then, poor good soul, she had little experience of public life, and was certainly a faithful and loving wife. Perhaps Lord Carteret may think of marrying again; his mother, I suspect, would encourage it, and he has a very considerable fortune."

"A grandfather! What girl would have anything to say to him?" exclaimed Lady Sophia Fermor, with a scornful glance.

"The lady who refused him would be likely to repent her imprudence," said George Montagu;

"and if a relative of mine, I should feel justified in turning her out of doors. How can you call a man aged whose mother is still alive, in the freshness and vigour of intellect?"

"I forgot the mother," added Lady Sophia with a laugh; "that is a further recommendation."

"And who has ever evinced such fondness for the sex as Carteret?" put in Mr. Winnington, interrupting his meal.

"Lord Carteret's is undoubtedly a very brilliant position," continued Lady Pomfret, dogmatically. "There is but one first minister in England, my love, and I agree with Mr. Montagu in thinking there is more than one woman who would agree to share that dignity. Think of Lord Carteret's actual wealth, and the greater fortune still his mother must bequeath him. I am told the estate his father acquired in America is as large as half England, and in a man of such shining parts the mind, after all, is everything. I have known very good judges affirm that my Lord is quite as great an orator as Cicero."

"But Cicero's wife had not such a mother-in-law, madam," said Winnington.

"I should like to see the girl that would refuse him," repeated the Countess, reflectively.

"Then you may see her, mamma!" said Lady Sophia. "No man alive, minister, king, or emperor, should have my hand without winning my affections."

"That to its proper address," whispered Winnington to Miss Montagu; "and Lincoln accepts the pretty sentiment with his eyes—delicious innocence!"

The Countess laughed. "Now if Lord Carteret were to march into the room this moment, and ask for one of my daughters, that observation would spoil your chance," she said playfully. "I should say to my Lord Carteret, 'Have nothing to do with Sophy, my Lord; she is too hot, too impulsive; her feelings get the better of her judgment sometimes, and hurry her to most extravagant conclusions: she resembles myself in that particular; so little able to calculate results

when her heart and sympathies are enlisted.' "—Winnington looked at Miss Montagu. "Not that I would think of refusing Lord Carteret for a son-in-law," continued the Countess gaily; "I am too much woman of the world for that. No, I should say to him honestly, 'My Lord, I will recommend you a wife; I will assist you with a mother's knowledge and experience;' and then I should honestly recommend him Charlotte. 'They are both good children, my Lord,' I should say; 'but Charlotte is the very girl for you; she is so clever, she will fall in with your cultivated tastes exactly, and speaks Spanish and Italian quite as well as yourself.' "

"A maternal inheritance, that gift of tongues," whispered Winnington. "Do the ladies inherit all the qualities of the mother?"

"Which would you choose to be—Lord Carteret, or the young earl opposite, after that?" asked Miss Montagu, in the same under-tone.

"I wager the Countess never wins on Lincoln after all," answered Winnington. "If I know the

Clinton pedigree and the Pelham blood, she will miss him."

"Hush! we shall be overheard. I should like to be a famous beauty with a prodigious fortune just for one season at least," said Miss Montagu aloud. "If for nothing but to bring some of these superb people to their senses."

"They would be all out of their senses about you then; it would have the very contrary effect," said Winnington.

"However, Lady Carteret, without pretensions either to beauty or fortune, succeeded in catching the greatest prize of all," answered the lady. "I shall have all details concerning the poor lady's demise in a letter from Eliza Montagu this afternoon."

"Mrs. Montagu writes such beautiful letters," said Lady Pomfret; "they must be greatly valued by her fortunate correspondents."

"Attention, a lecture coming," whispered Winnington.

"And they are so," replied Miss Montagu.

"The Duchess of Portland has them all neatly pasted into an album."

"A better plan," said Lady Pomfret with an air of proper authority, becoming to so literary a subject—"a far better plan is to have the letters copied in manuscript into a copybook. That is my way. The letters of all the correspondents whom I value are so treated. Charlotte and Henrietta undertake this labour; and to improve their minds, I make them write all the proper names in red ink: that is an idea of my own."

"And a famous one, madam. I shall borrow it from you for my own use," said Winnington. "The proper names in red ink."

"It was the way I formed my own epistolary style by copying in my youth Mary Montagu's letters," said the Countess in a modest voice. "I assure you some of my friends write very elegantly. I have had a letter from Lady Bel Finch eight pages long on the difference between friendship and love, and so beautifully worded."

"Did Lady Bel say anything about her own indifference to either, madam?" asked Winnington.

"It is so good for young people to be employed, that I consider the excessive labour one of the advantages of my copying plan," continued the Countess dogmatically. "That is why I persist in the practice: it gives employment, imparts knowledge, forms the style, and exercises the hand all at the same time. My children have already acquired a general facility with the pen on account of the exercise. Ah, have you all finished breakfast together?" The lecture of the Countess was brought prematurely to a close by the visible inattention of the audience.

People began to rise and whisper, and the gentlemen next the door passed swiftly through it into the lobby. Miss Montagu suppressed a little yawn. Mr. Winnington pushed away his plate. The Countess perceived her weakness; she had ridden that cherished hobby indiscreetly far—so far that the patience of her audience was out of breath and could not follow; but she recovered

her position readily, and gracefully changing to a lighter subject, rose from the table with the rest of her guests. They were all shuffling through the room now, looking out for hats and scarfs. My Earl backed into his arm-chair, with the letter-bag stuffed under it. They would be all gone in a few moments this fine company, and he, poor man, could open his packages at his leisure, and soak over the fresh delights of the 'News Letter' alone, and have Gregory bring him a mug of surreptitious ale, a refreshment for which he greatly thirsted. So the company began to pass slowly from the room, laughing and talking; the direct sunbeams of the portico striking the rich dresses as the crowd dispersed in the hall, breaking up into parties bound to the library, the drawing-rooms, boudoirs, flower-garden and shrubberies.

How oddly the right people got together, for all the shuffling and confusion, and managed also to discover the locality most suitable for their tastes or employment. In a short time afterwards, Mr. Pitt

of Warrender found himself entangled in a meandering shrubbery walk with Lady Charlotte Fermor, and an occasional burst of laughter tracked the course of Mr. Winnington and Miss Montagu along the quaint corridor leading to the library.

Lord Lempster was among the laggards in the breakfast-room; he yawned and shook himself. It was going to be a dreary and a miserable time for him, this continued good-behaviour, enforced and unnatural as it was—this mawkish company that filled the house. He had put on a gorgeous coat, and tried to mince his words, and keep down his lisp, and say smart things to the women like Winnington for three days running; he had let the bottle pass at dinner and supper time, and underwent other unaccustomed acts of carnal mortification; but now his soul was weary of it. The velvet suit was tight, and strangled his fat limbs. The old Adam stirred under his flowery waistcoat glittering with foil; a hunger for forbidden fleshpots gnawed him. Here was another fair, hot day. Was he to pass it again sauntering about walks and

shrubberies, gaping at those gawky statues, listening to talk of primroses and poesies, and kindred gibberish, straining all the while in his polite manners as uncomfortably as in his tight clothes? "Oh, for cakes and ale in a shady bower! any pleasant pastime—a dice-box, a pipe, a main of cocks, or a badger to draw!"

He tapped George Montagu on the shoulder, and whispered—

"In the bowling green yonder?" repeated Montagu, half turning in reply; "what is to be done there?"

"They will take you off fishing or boating on the river mind with the women, if you don't save yourself in time," answered Lempster. "My mother has arranged some project of that kind. I give you notice. We can have a pipe in the bowling green first; then join the others, if you will; but I lay even you don't, and five to three you repent it if you do."

Montagu turned lazily, and looked at the sun. It was going to be very hot; the light played on

the flat reach of water above the weir; through the trees he could see the boats there, with figures in them. He had been bored yesterday, and in the light of this hot forenoon a water party with the ladies looked an unpromising picture. Then Lempster, making another sign, slipped from the room and Montagu followed lazily.

Going round by the stables they fell in with old Sir Charles Brandon, a county native, and young Squire Thornton, another, who were asking Sykes the keeper about the fishing, and took them on: two more stragglers from the breakfast-room also appeared. So Lempster's coup succeeded. He had a congenial party assembled to drink with; 'twas better than moping and dangling, and yawning one's heart out with the women-kind.

They reached the bowling green. Lord Lempster in high good-humour. One sees him now standing apart on the shaven lawn with a pensive air, his face turned from the sun, which strikes the feather of his hat, and comes pouring down over the rich creases of his velvet back—a round knock-

kneed figure; the sun casts a long narrow shadow across the sward; the birds are twittering in the branches overhead; the daisies peep under the sprawling rosettes of his clumsy shoes; behind, Montagu and the others are grouped in the shade of the arbour. Montagu with a hesitating weariness in his face, dangling his cane as if uncertain whether to remain with these clumsy squires or take his chance of being bored in another way elsewhere; and young Thornton, as eager for a booze or a game as Lempster himself, eyeing Hawks the valet, who is arranging the jugs and flagons.

Presently Lempster turns round, and approaches the arbour humming a tune; he has hatched a project for passing the day, and is in a pleasant temper with himself and all the world.

"I'll *s*'lay any man fift*h*y guineas that*h* I break a bottle on that bowling post*h* with a pist*h*ol bullet from where I sit*h*," he said in a while, after they were seated at their refreshment. He had a natural lisp, which came out very strong

in familiar conversation when not making efforts to be fine in his speech. We need not reproduce his peculiar accent here, the reader will understand that he had a natural thickness of tongue. "That I do it six times out of nine, and that no man here does it four shots out of nine, for another fifty or a hundred," he added briskly. "Hawks, fetch my pistol-case for a try. My pistols, booby, do you hear? Drop that tankard, and be quick about it," he repeated impatiently, scowling at the man.

"Pistols! and have all the women down about our ears at once?" said Sir Charles Brandon.

"Then we must send for Thornton's brindled bitch, that is it," said Lord Lempster; "and I'll lay my blue mastiff Tommy against her, though a pound under weight, for a fifty, if you like."

"The bitch has broke her lower fang, as you are aware, my Lord," said Sir Charles; "I'm a plain squire, but you can't take me in with your Newmarket tricks."

"That is a d—— pretty thing to say to a man in his own house, Brandon," replied Lempster;

"the bitch was never in better order; and I'm going to get a picture-drawer to make her portrait. Come, I'll take her, and give you the dog for the same money. That's fair, anyhow; who says done?"

"Done. No—stay! I'll put no money on any match here to-day," added Sir Charles cautiously; "any game you like, but I'm not in for a match to-day."

"What! make a match, and then draw stakes; that's doing nothing. Play or pay, all the world over—a sporting man like you to draw stakes like a cocktail!"

"But what are we to do with ourselves without a match?" inquired Thornton. "You decide for us, Montagu. Try a pipe, and think of something, smoking helps one's invention."

"I don't smoke; tobacco upsets me."

"Rubbish! there is nothing like tobacco," blurted out Lempster; "nothing so good for man or beast. I give it to my horses sometimes. Half an ounce at a time given to a horse among his corn, and

continued for a week, will prevent worms, cure greasy heels, and create a fine coat."

"You must consume much tobacco yourself then," answered Montagu; "your coat is so fine."

"So it is. A plague on your French tailoring! I am pinioned at every joint in it, like a knave at the gallows," cried out Lempster. "We must get off to my rooms; and I shall get off this plaguy coat, and, hot as it is, we will manage to get over the forenoon somehow," he added, at the same time making a motion with his hand, or rather with his elbow, which was generally understood.

"Upstairs in the house itself?" inquired Montagu, as Brandon and Thornton exchanged nods of approval.

"Why not? They will be all in the garden presently, and we can slip back unobserved; we shall be comfortable there. My mother will not catch us—and—and," he added, chuckling at the joke, "none of us are likely to be missed from the water-party with the women; our kind are not

much wanted down there, with their poetry and gibberish."

"Suppose you send for Lincoln to join us also; he is not likely to be missed or wanted either," said Montagu, with a grimace.

"O, Lincoln! not he; what would my mother say then?" Lord Lempster blushed and laughed; but he was prudent, and caught himself up readily. "We will manage to do without Lincoln this time," he mumbled, dipping his nose in a flagon.

So it was that temptation sidled in among those guileless spirits. Whenever the tempter first enters a forbidden inclosure, be it into the garden of Eden, a bower, a sanctuary, or a bowling green, it is always the same, he invariably approaches in a sly quizzing way with an oblique movement, which disarms suspicion and secures him easy welcome and snug quarters. Lempster had a settled purpose in his drowsy eyes for all his careless manner, he did not heed what they did, or where they went, or how they spent the day; he said it was all the same to him, he was at every-

body's service, but by continuing to introduce his project and press the point he carried it in the end, and sometime afterwards the scene shifts from the sward of the bowling green to a green plane of a far more dangerous character.

Figures might be seen slipping cautiously along the north-east gallery which led to Lord Lempster's private apartments. The windows were all open for air, the different chambers untenanted, the gallery noiseless, everybody was abroad. Lempster was right in calculating on a retreat to his rooms without attracting observation, but he was wrong in supposing that the nature of the pastime there would remain long undiscovered. The open windows first betrayed it, although the door was securely fastened on the inside—one can never be sufficiently cautious in such a case—but through the open windows a peculiar clinking sound penetrated the motionless leaves of the overhanging chestnuts, and pierced the solitudes of the shrubbery; Lady Charlotte started as it reached her there, and her companion, Mr. Pitt, not only de-

tected the nature of the sound, but also recognised Lempster's unpleasant lisp high in the slang of the game; this man might possibly be his future brother-in-law—who knows! The indulgence of that summer morning's main may have cost Lady Charlotte much sentimental distress, as well as an excellent settlement in life, for Mr. Pitt was long-headed enough, and though young, prudent as a bishop. However, he discreetly moved away from that side of the garden, and under the plea of heat, the pair returned to the house at a loitering pace. As they entered the library, it was a universal clamour against the common enemy the sun.

Lady Sophia was faint. Miss Montagu perversely patient, Lord Lincoln impatient. Everybody lazy, and in the darkest nook behind the window Mr. Winnington, with a cambric napkin binding his temples, affected to have a headache.

Lady Henrietta had just received from town a package of yellow feathers for her pole screen; but her fingers became so warm that the feathers

stuck to them, and her arms so heavy that she could not move. How stiff the rigid high-backed chairs had become; the square griddle pattern sofas, although in the height of fashion, were a mockery of comfort. Lady Henrietta was already fainting when for climax, a ball of silver foil escaped from her work-table and ran away of itself over the polished floor, leaving a track of light behind as it unwound; a little sigh from Lady Henrietta at this catastrophe; Mr. Winnington from his couch made a languid feint at picking up the ball, his short arm missed it, then Mr. Pitt moved, but Lady Henrietta, putting up her hands, cried out that he must not come near, he looked so hot, and with another sigh she closed her work-table, leaving the spool on the floor where it lay.

"We have just come in from the garden, 'tis even more intolerable there," said Lady Charlotte, finding a seat.

"There is not shadow for a linnet in our garden," said Lady Sophia crossly, "even in moderate weather that glaring garden with its white

pebble walks and gaudy parterres renders one dizzy. The thought of it assists the heat; at present I feel how the sun is shining down on the statues there, making the coldest river nymphs hot to the touch, and Cicero's head shine like a reflector."

"It is only my Lord Carteret's head which is the shining reflector of Cicero's," murmured Winnington from his corner.

"I am sick of my Lord Carteret and his head," said Lady Sophia.

'So was his wife, poor lady," said Winnington, "he finished her off with his head. He would keep her up all night reading the Latin grammar, until the poor soul turned crazy in the end at it, and not being born to craziness both by father and mother like my lord, died at last. Then he was such a talker."

"Lord Carteret an incessant talker, in the House, you mean?"

"In the House, out of the House, everywhere; he was as long-winded as a camel; he killed the

poor lady with his tongue; there should have been an inquest on it," added Winnington.

"Fancy a man talking down his wife, I don't believe it possible," said Mr. Pitt languidly.

Here Lord Lincoln crossed the room and took the seat beside Lady Sophia; that place had been vacant for some time, but nobody had ventured to fill it. It was a throne that his Majesty only was privileged to sit upon.

"If we could face the worst of the sun for a few minutes," he said. "If once at the foot of the lawn by the river-side, we should find it cooler. A breeze is on the river, a deliciously green view, and besides the summer-house is there for a refuge. I propose making the attempt, it would be a pleasant change," he added, addressing Lady Sophia directly.

"Al fresco," she murmured.

"Aye. Al fresco," he repeated in a whisper, "like those other days in Florence long ago. Ah! Those were pleasant days, the happiest of my life. Alas!"

Lady Sophia looked at the silver bobbin on the floor; was it going to come at last? she pondered. There was a pause, she dared not move—Winnington's whispering tones came to her across the room, but she could not raise her eyes to discover where those other eyes were looking, as the low pitched voice continued rapidly—

"That glorious old Palazzo, those magnificent gardens! Sometimes the orange-scented leaves come to me in dreams, and once one begins to dream, one goes on dreaming—dreaming,"—he paused again. "Perhaps I shall never see that old garden, or if so, not find the old fragrance there," he added in broken sentences. "Happiness does not attach itself to localities, yet I was happy there. Wherein lay the secret of it, Lady Sophia? or can there be degrees in happiness. No! no more than in truth itself, that is my creed. There is no first and second, at least not for me, not for one of my nature—with others it may be different. But I can never taste that peace which I found at the Ridolfi; never

again, unless I meet with the old friends, and find them as I myself am, unchanged; for I have never changed, never, Lady Sophia, notwithstanding the false impressions which, perhaps, were formed regarding me—I have ever been the same, and if I dared hope that it was so with others likewise, that the dear friends of that happy time were still as I believed them then to be, that they had not judged me lightly, rashly, in an unjust or a hasty spirit, and that I had not fallen in their—their—esteem, let me call it, then indeed, it might be—— Ah, Lady Henrietta! confess that I am the only man of gallantry here—not one of these lazy gentlemen would stir themselves in your service," added Lincoln in confusion; snatching up the silver bobbin from the floor and presenting it with a jerk to Lady Henrietta, who had softly crossed the room and overheard the concluding sentence of his speech; but Lady Henrietta was prudent.

"I was forced to come for it myself," she said, receiving the spool; "at a certain stage of

the thermometer the gallantry of your sex evaporates. But it is settled nevertheless that we are to face the terrors of the garden and set out for the river-side, though it has been carried against the votes of the only two sensible people here, Mr. Winnington and myself—yet we accept the decision with a good grace. Mr. Winnington contracts not to disturb public order by a single spiteful observation. Miss Montagu answers for his good behaviour, though the security is doubtful. There are to be haycocks by the water's edge under the limes for us to sit upon, and we take our notting bags, and shall see the trout jump, and the gardeners are to send down strawberries and any peaches that can be found. Somebody is to make rebuses, Mr. Winnington I suppose. And we shall guess them—Miss Montagu excels as an improvisatrice. You, Lord Lincoln, are set down to read Petrarch in your softest Tuscan. So you must look quite as sentimental as you can."

"Yes, people of fashion have cast off French to their valets and waiting women, and the softer

Italian is now the language of life," said George Montagu, who had just entered. "If ladies would only dress for the occasion, it would be one of Watteau's sylvan scenes."

"Or a scene from the Decameron," whispered Mr. Pitt.

"Perhaps the last scene of all which marks this strange eventful history; who knows?" said Winnington in the same tone, glancing at Lady Sophia and her lover, who passed from the room together, the rest of the ladies following.

"Hey, Montagu, you look hotter than any of us; where have you come from, last?"

"From hell then direct, as you ask," said Montagu, "and by a miracle I effected my escape in safety."

"Is the temperature as bad as in this place?" asked Winnington.

"Go up by the north-west gallery to Lempster's rooms, and judge for yourself; it's hotter than I could support: you'll find a cask of sack on draught there, and the luckiest pair of dice I ever saw come

out of a box, besides half a dozen rustic cutpurses swearing their lungs out. If you fancy a new sensation, mount to the Inferno in the north-west gallery ; but keep your sword and leave your purse, for if drunkenness the peace-maker don't mercifully seize them all, there will be a brawl before dinner-time, faugh! their filthy tobacco pipes! I must air my clothes; let us follow to the summer-house, and see this odd sport to the end.

CHAPTER XII.

A WATTEAU.

However bright the summer sun on the meadows, Lady Pomfret did not join the gay company that passed down the lawn to the water's edge. She had no fancy for Watteau costumes, or poetry, or rebuses, or Mr. Winnington's conundrums, or Lord Lincoln's harmonious Italian; but she gave instructions to the servants about the strawberries and cream and other refreshments to be served in the summer-house, and then sailed away alone into the interior of the house, her mind occupied with varied anxieties. The conduct of all the proceedings was upon her shoulders—the responsibility lay with her alone: she had to combine and organise, as well as supervise, the execution of every detail; and, if things had so far moved on smoothly and

pleasantly, still there was not much progress, little actual business had been done, she could not feel satisfied about it. Lord Lincoln, though several days in the house, had not yet advanced beyond the mooning and gaping point—beyond the position in which things were before leaving town. It was all very well to have a great match, and the heir to a dukedom dangling after one's handsome daughter, but this sterile dangling had continued so long at one point, that the novelty, as well as the excitement, of it had passed away. It was no longer the light literature of flirtation that the Countess desired to see, but a practical business-turn pointing to a definite result.

So when Lady Henrietta came up to ask if her mother would not choose to hear my Lord Lincoln read Petrarch in the summer-house, the Countess was near giving her daughter a smart box on the ear for answer. Petrarch, indeed! at this time of the day, when Sophia was all but compromised by his attentions, when her name was in everybody's mouth, when a man of honour should

be talking to papa about provisions and settlements, instead of airing his mawkish Tuscan under the lime trees.

Reading *Italian*, forsooth. The Countess hated the word in connection with Lincoln, she had had enough already of his Italian sentiment, the word was ominous to her.

It was out of all reason, this eternal mooning, and dangling, and ogling, and sliding away from the point. Was Lord Lincoln going to make a duchess of Sophia? and if so, why didn't he offer a proposition in black and white to that effect? It was not a question of haycocks and summer-houses; of cooling breezes and Petrarchs any longer. If Lincoln did not mean to do that, then what did the man mean? Why didn't he come to an intelligible decision either one way or the other? With her clear business-eye, the Countess saw all round the question at a glance.

Even if he hesitated through bashfulness, what was Sophia about? why didn't she lead him up point-blank to a declaration? What was the use of

lecturing and forming the girl in secret if she did not apply the lessons at such a crisis as this; also with the antecedent disaster at Florence before her for a warning? What was the advantage of holding the hand of trumps she did, if without the skill to play them out? The Countess was losing patience with everybody.

Here was the last chance. If Lincoln departed this time without leaving a proposal behind him, it was over with the project. If nothing came of this visit, nothing would ever come after it, and she would remain not only a disappointed and a miserable woman, but the laughing-stock of the town for the rest of her days.

It will be seen that Lady Pomfret was admirably candid with herself, and did not use any subterfuge of language to disguise the character of the proceedings as far as she was herself concerned. It was simply the birdcatcher's eye watching the linnet approach the twig which was so cleverly limed to snare it, a tantalising state of mind enough, what wonder if the lid was constantly getting off her

temper at each fresh disappointing flutter of the twittering game. At present her brow wore a peculiar pucker as she passed upstairs to her own quarters.

The menials of the establishment knew that pucker well, and avoided an encounter with her Ladyship when the portentous wrinkle appeared. It was the storm drum, which indicated that a tempest was very nigh. Even members of the family, the daughters—my Earl himself—were not indifferent to the symbol. Everybody quailed before it except, perhaps, the heedless and reckless Lempster, the heir and hope, as well as the fool, of the family, and already the sharpest thorn in his mother's side. Yet this coarse underbred son, whose life was already a disgrace, whose extravagance had become a real anxiety, was the only person alive, perhaps, that Lady Pomfret feared.

No principle restrained him; never had a generous impulse leavened his selfishness, yet his heavy, brutal nature cowed her, and she dreaded to thwart or arouse it.

A few moments afterwards, while traversing the

north-east gallery, a clicking sound reached her ears, and simultaneously the reverberation of an oath, then an overbearing, inarticulate, familiar voice rang out in angry tones.

Ah!——what was that noise?

The ominous pucker on the maternal brow faded into a black shadow, as if a cloud had passed before the sun.

"What, in the broad summer noon, surrounded by guests, to turn the house into a gambling hell! How heedless—how dead to the instincts of his race, of a gentleman, to the interests of us all," she exclaimed; but together with her anger her characteristic caution awoke. "How to keep this secret, and prevent the scandal of it from spreading?" she reflected; as a renewed burst of wrangling voices swept down the corridor.

"You may be rattling away a Dukedom in your dice-box, and scattering your sister's prospects on the table," she cried out fiercely. There was fortunately no one there to hear, all the rooms were empty.

"But he would not care, not he; he cares for nothing," she gasped, as rising anger choked her. An over-mastering impulse, the tigress came up in her then; for a moment it seemed that the lightning would leap out of the cloud, and she crossed the corridor with a sort of bound; but it was merely to lay her fingers lightly on the handle of the chamber door, and turn promptly away; the indiscretion of an exposure was apparent. He had little love or respect for her; an encounter would only expose her to a scene of brutality perhaps, and promote a greater scandal; so with a deep sigh, she gathered her floating silks quickly together, and retraced her steps, rustling down the gallery, while the clatter of the falling dice-box kept singing in her ears.

"Wretched boy, obstinate and selfish like his father!" she exclaimed, mounting the staircase which led directly to her own apartments. "My life has been worn out working and watching for them all, yet they combine against me as if on purpose; obstinate and careless like his father."

This ricochet of spleen towards my Earl was

singularly unjust, and had no special meaning, perhaps, in her mind, except that, being angry with Lempster, her feelings instinctively discharged themselves on the natural and legitimate scapegoat her husband; besides, the form of expression was habitual with her, and in family skirmishing often answered the useful purpose of killing two birds with one stone.

"They are all alike incompetent, ignorant, apathetic, obstinate," she repeated, gaining the threshold of her chamber; but here a real victim in unsuspecting flesh and blood was meekly waiting to receive a discharge from her bad temper. Prim Mrs. Rogers, the housekeeper, stood in her cap and mittens, morocco account-book in hand, bland and smiling, with the smug confidential air belonging to her office.

But the Countess snatched the account-book and tossed it in her face, screaming out at the waste and mismanagement of the house, the indifference of the dinners, and neglect of the servants; Lempster's transgressions, Sophia's stupidity,

Lincoln's delay, all, all came down together on the head of the astonished and unoffending matron. Then the Countess banged the door. She was, maybe, better for this relief to her nerves.

There was a sofa between the draught of the window and door, and by the sofa a cabinet; she unlocked the cabinet with a cunning little key suspended at her girdle, and took out a small mother-of-pearl tipped flask; it was like a smelling-salts bottle, but the flask did not contain sal-volatile.

Remember that she was fighting her battle of life, and in the hot press of the combat. It is not a pleasant thing to relate—according to conventional forms, the narrator owes an apology for being so particular. Perhaps it was not a graceful thing for her to do, or for the reader to see, but Lady Pomfret was not a heroine, nor shall we say exactly that which is called a model in the language of fiction sense, however irreproachable her life may have been. Let those who may, cast the first stone. She was no saint or ascetic; but a courageous, pushing child of the world—of this world,

mind, not the other—one who always stood forward in the middle of the scramble for its gifts and chances. Yet now a crisis had come; her debased son had struck at her cruelly. Here a great scandal was being committed, and it might be disclosed, and perhaps ruin everything. It was something like mutiny in the ranks while in face of the enemy.

What if Lincoln himself should hear of it, and take alarm! The Countess exaggerated the circumstance, as people do when their own interests and feelings are enlisted.

It was something unforeseen, a contingency for which there had been no provision in the plan of the campaign, an ambuscade. What wonder if there was some confusion at the discovery, if her temper, her nerves, even her courage, began to waver? At such a crisis Lady Pomfret was one to snatch at a consolation or a restorative, wherever she could find it—in the flask, or elsewhere. And if at such an emergency help lay in yonder cabinet, and she had the key at her girdle—what then? Should she refuse to help

herself? As a fact, she felt no squeamishness about turning the lock.

Meanwhile the expedition to the river side went well. Lord Lincoln read a page of Petrarch, Winnington sprawled on a haycock and, shaded by a sycamore, lay dissolving in the heat; and Mr. Pitt tried an improvisation with Miss Montagu's guitar, and failed in it. The instrument was untuned and the audience unsympathetic, he said, in answer to the sarcasms of his auditory, and that was the whole of his fault.

Then George Montagu took up a volume from the grass, and in a mock sentimental way began to read to Lady Henrietta.

"My gentle maiden!
The hour of our appointment long is past,
Already down the slope on beds of green
The slanting sunbeam sleeps, and underneath
The dark grey firs the darker shadows stretch,
As if impatient for their home, the East.
Awhile the heralder of eve the rail,
Railed at his mocking fellow as I passed;
So come—the plumed laburnum waves you forth,
And every sylvan flow'ret droops with hope
Longing to feast her vi'let eyes on you:

You that are grace and prettiness itself,
The pretty playthings sure will not disdain,
Nor longer keep the fluted throstle mute
That waits to chime your advent through the grove.
So shall we forth along the velvet sward,
On by the tangled mazes of the wood,
Into the twilight of o'er-hanging boughs
Where the furze glimmers, and the blue bell peeps,
Along the pathway—while aloft,
High in the belfry of the tallest pine,
Like to a sylvan spirit mad with joy,
The cuckoo rings his echo down the vale."

"If somebody would silence Montagu, the musician might entertain us with another failure, perhaps," said Winnington, glancing at Mr. Pitt, who mockingly kept strumming the strings of the guitar in a determined way as if meditating a surprising effort. "He shows a sign of returning confidence." "Ecce Signum," then exclaimed the other, at once singing this time a ballad of Mr. Gay's, very popular at the period.

"Phyllida, that lov'd to dream
In the grove or by the stream,
Sigh'd on velvet pillow,
What, alas! should fill her head
But a fountain or a mead,
Water and a willow?

"Love in cities never dwells,
He delights in rural cells
Which sweet woodbine covers,
What are your assemblies then?
There 'tis true we see more men,
But much fewer lovers.

"Oh, how changed the prospect grows!
Flocks and herds to fops and beaux,
Coxcombs without number:
Moon and stars that shone so bright
To the torch and waxen light,
And whole nights at ombre."

"Do let us have strawberries in the summer house," said Winnington, rolling from the haycock to his feet, "anything to put an end to this wearisome farce."

"Which farce? there is but one way of ending *that*," said Montagu, glancing at Lady Sophia and her lover, who sat on the margin of the stream some dozen yards away embowered in branches and leaves, partly invisible to the others.

"Here love and music, yonder strawberries and cream; let us go," said Winnington.

"'Phyllida, that lov'd to dream
In the grove or by the stream.'

That looks a promising prospect, Montagu."

"It is neither a novelty nor a difficulty to him to do that; he has always contrived to look promising; it's his way of raising expectations."

"But if his expectations be great, consider all he is heir to."

"He seems heir to much happiness at present."

"And will inherit it," said Winnington, putting up his eyeglass at Lincoln's reclining figure.

"I doubt."

"You are overheard," said Miss Montagu in an undertone. And Winnington, intercepting an oblique glance from the sharp Lady Henrietta, turned to George Montagu, and in an indifferent tone continued their talk about a plan for taking trout with flies in the dog days.

Lord Lincoln and Lady Sophia were separated from the others by a screen of intervening branches —overhead a hawthorn in flower, a bend of the stream swept murmuring below, and a fragrant snow shower of overblown blossoms rained down on the whispering pair. The air was heavy with

scents, the river murmured by musically in soft cadence to the lovers' confidences. Lady Sophia was radiant with the light of happiness, her beauty was enhanced, transfigured by this added lustre, and Lord Lincoln, struck by the similitude of the scene, read aloud the well-known stanza from the open Petrarch on his knee :—

" Una pioggia di fior sovra 'l suo grembo :
Ed ella si sedea
Umile in tanta gloria,
Coverta già dell' amoroso nembo :
Qual fior cadea sul lembo,
Qual sullè trecce bionde ;
Ch' oro forbito e perle
Eran quel dì a vederle
Qual si posava in terra, e qual sull' onde :
Qual con un vago errore
Girando, parea dir, ' Quì regna Amore.' "*

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* Lines which Father Prout has translated :

" Here as she once reclined,
A shower of blossoms on her bosom fell,
And while th' enamoured tree
From all its branches thus
Rained odoriferous,
She sat unconscious, all humility—
Mixed with her golden hair, those blossoms sweet

But the musical Italian verse was not needed to supply Lincoln with fanciful imagery. His imagination was rich in colour of its own; and his emotions, glowing under the influence of perfect beauty, asked for no promptings at second-hand, even from the embalmed spirit of Petrarch. The glamour of the love-spell was on him; that vision of loveliness filled him like an inspiration; his senses drank it in like the scents from the jessamine. Madonna Laura—Madonna Sophia!—did she not surpass all the love dreams which artist or poet had imagined or votary embalmed in song?

He plucked a flower from beside her hand resting on the grass. Holding the flower between his fingers, their hands met.

Like pearls on amber seemed;
Some their allegiance deemed
Due to her floating robe and lovely feet·
Others, disporting, took
Their course adown the brook:
Others aloft in airy sport
Seemed to proclaim, 'To-day Love holds his merry court.'"

Lady Henrietta came near to summon them to the summer house, but she did not come quite near. Lady Henrietta was not one to commit a clumsy sin of interference twice, so she retraced her steps and cleverly got the others of the party off to the house and strawberries without disturbing the lovers.

After refreshment in the arbour the temperature cooled; then followed some make-believe hay-making by the ladies, a little well-bred romping among the haycocks, and the party divided into groups or pairs, dispersing through the pleasure-grounds and returning at intervals to the house, leaving Lord Lincoln and Lady Sophia still conversing by the river-side.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VISION OF BLISS.

A PARTY of these loiterers passed Lady Pomfret on the great staircase. She was again in the front. The Countess had mounted a fresh horse as it were and resumed the command. That affair in the north-east corridor was to be managed someway, how, was not yet clear, but she would get over it. 'Twas a difficulty merely, not an obstacle. So she swept down over the field again, sighting the position as it were, reviewing the troops, ready for any emergency. A fresh effort—another charge, to lead a forlorn hope if the case required it. Her courage was refreshed, and her face wore a slight flush perhaps, though the temperature had cooled and the afternoon breezes were astir.

She spoke to some of her guests as they passed

on the lobby. There was no trace of emotion in her face or voice, though her temper was still simmering, for meeting her second daughter in the hall, she inquired crossly for Lady Sophia, and continued in a querulous, complaining way.

"Sophy has mislaid the key of the china closet, and Rogers wants to get out some ware. Everything appears going wrong to day—as if on purpose to fidget and worry me," she said, thinking again of the gambling party in the gallery. "I can neither find the key nor my daughter. You all appear to keep out of the way on purpose. Pray where am I to look for Sophy?"

"You have only to look straight before you, mamma, to see her. She is down there ever since!" exclaimed Lady Charlotte, pointing to where Lady Sophia's white dress and bright blue ribbons appeared glimmering through the trees. "Down by the river—there, beyond the summer house. They have been quite alone these hours, mamma; they have not stirred for the whole of the day," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper.

The Countess looked. Then she gazed into her daughter's face steadily. It was not the first time that Lady Charlotte had shown a propensity to meddle in this delicate affair. Lady Charlotte had an active disposition, an inclination towards business. She was her own child in that way, and the Countess mistrusted her.

"And Lord Lincoln has never left her, mamma?"

"I don't wonder at people not choosing to move about on such a day as this," answered the Countess placidly, and in an accent which said, There shall be no confidence with you, so put it out of your head, and attend to your own affairs. "If I cannot sit still it is my fault, because activity is my nature; but I admire the discretion of those who can rest in such a temperature. I should cultivate indolence also if I had any in my disposition."

"As you please, mamma. Every one to her taste. I am going up to the harpsichord, and Henrietta has already returned to her pole screen: you see we are your own daughters for industry," tartly answered Lady Charlotte, tossing her head,

"Sophia may be one of the idle virgins, and dangle away her time, but we are not. We are models and good children," she added saucily, arching her neck and opening her fan.

"You are all good children indeed," said the mother timidly, drooping her eyes at this direct challenge. Of all her daughters, this one had her most under control. "Tell me, Dolly, has he really been alone with her ever since, all this time?" she inquired in a mollified tone. "I am hot and cross, and worried, do not be smart with me. Where is Henrietta? she must have remained with them for the look of it; she ought to have remained. Yet I do not see Henrietta!"

"Henrietta is gone to her pole screen, as I say, mamma," answered Lady Dolly in an unbending way, "and I—I promised Miss Montagu to practise a new minuet of Monsieur Courbet's. I cannot wait. I cannot disappoint Miss Montagu, on any account, and I know nothing of anything going on down there either. How should I?

Sophia is not my confidant, nor apparently anybody else either," and Lady Charlotte sailed haughtily upstairs in her Watteau costume of light silk with blue satin stripes, and a gipsy hat bound with meadow daisies, framing in her proud, beautiful face with its clustering auburn ringlets.

Another stab, and from a filial hand! It seemed as if the proverbial serpent's tooth of thankless offspring was in one shape or other to keep gnawing at the Countess through the course of that day. But no! It was not true in every instance. There was a view yonder by the river. The Countess looked again with charmed eyes. How she longed to go down there nearer. It was a sore temptation, but mere madness, to think of it in sight of all the windows, and the park studded with spies in hooped petticoats—that was not to be thought of. Yet the fascination of that view was irresistible, and she stood awhile longer under the pillars of the portico gazing through the open doors, thankful for the few moments of un-

disturbed opportunity and leisure. Then a considerate angel inspired her with a clever thought—a guardian angel, may be; for possibly grown-up worldly people, as well as simpering cherub-faced children in tawdry prints and ritualistic decorations, are also provided with those gentle, considerate counsellors in impossible wings.

There was the Gothic window of the library overlooking the stream and the summer-house; the western window with the stained glass coat of arms; the Jefferies coat with supporters by the right-hand mullion—that which had been especially placed there as a piece of superfluous ornamentation for this visit of Lord Lincoln's. At this hour the library would be empty. There was a telescope on the library table.

The library was empty. The Countess stood with her back against the door for a moment. She was out of breath from the speed of the rush upstairs. Was it merely the exercise, or else the effect of mental excitement? But a quicker action of the heart brought her to an alarming pause

then. There was a mystery and a dread about that sensitive and excitable heart of hers. She had a fear or a superstition concerning it, a belief that she should some day drop down suddenly without any warning, perhaps in the midst of some successful project or scheme; it might be at the supreme moment of triumph while extending her hand to gather in the harvest. It might come then. What if it should be now? if this was the appointed hour? If death were to arrive at this moment while her eyes longed for that vision of bliss beyond the sycamore leaves?

Oh, if it should be! that fate was so cruel, that she was to perish in view of the Land of Promise, never to enter, with those weary feet which had been travelling so long through the desert in pursuit of a settlement and a dukedom. But it was not yet. The Countess gave a long deep sigh, and her strength returned. The first application which she made of it was to shoot the bolt of the door, then cross the room to double lock the corresponding one on the other side,

bolting that leading into the vestibule and the gallery. She came back to the table, and removed the dusty covering from the telescope, carefully adjusting the instrument to a proper focus.

There she remained kneeling in a state of beatific vision if not in prayer, her hoop swelling around an immense pillow of silk, with a frizzled and powdered head fixed in the centre of it, her eye steady at the orifice of the friendly glass. Eager, anxious, observant. Not a detail escaped her; not a movement of the white dress coming in glimpses through the ash leaves, not a flutter of a blue ribbon, not a gesture nor change of position of the gentleman reclining on the river bank. Sometimes an accident interrupted the range of the glass; a slight change of position which brought an intervening branch or haycock awkwardly in the line of vision; but the Countess saw sufficiently well, and was content with the prospect.

Distance lent its proverbial enchantment to the view, and her eager imagination filled in whatever appeared to be wanting in the action of the lovers.

That hour passed in the library was one of the happiest of her life. Such hours are while fancy and imagination supply the coloured ingredients of them. She remained at her post until the last minute, when the return of people from the gardens, and a threatened invasion of the library, compelled her to unlock the door, to replace the telescope on the bookshelf, and resume the routine of the general duties of hostess.

In the great entrance hall she encountered Mrs. Commyns of Rosslyn, Mrs. Lomax and her two daughters, and a flock of gentlemen, Montagu and the rest, almost the last division of guests, returning together at the approach of the dinner hour. Lady Pomfret had a natural and legitimate hatred of those ladies. Of Mrs. Commyns, not only because she was thought like herself in person, but was undeniably younger, and also, shall we say, more gifted in personal charms. She had a certain distinction of style, but that might have been on account of the difference of height; a little thing gives an effect, and Mrs. Commyns had the ad-

vantage by an inch perhaps. Before the Countess came back from the Continent with the increase of embonpoint, which still shortened her figure and diminished her style, she might have passed for as much of a beauty as that dressy Mrs. Commyns, but now it was different. How contemporary ladies of a certain age do envy each other the few pieces of small change of personal charms which time, the ungallant highwayman, still refrains from pilfering. How busy and interested Mrs. Grundy grows on this subject, on the solvent character of the faces of her matronly acquaintances. The question of degree is of such importance to her. How she curtails and detracts, explains away a beauty, gives private information about a blush. Yonder face is not so rich as it pretends to be, my dear, but like other pretenders to fortune, has obtained a show of ready money by paying usurious interest; Mrs. Grundy could tell where the loan was effected and how. She knew the den where the Jew dwelt who sold the rouge and plaster. There was an ancestress of Mrs. Grundy living in the last century, who moved

as much amongst persons of quality as her descendant does in fashionable circles now; she resided very respectably then in the neighbourhood of Duke Street, it might have been, or some equally fastidious and elegant street cutting between Lincoln's Inn and Covent Garden, a district wherein the carriage of her dainty descendant is rarely visible.

Towards Mrs. Lomax the Countess had merely a strong professional dislike. There was no room for personal rivalry with that beady-eyed, copper-skinned, lanthorn-cheeked little lady; good and pious, she might have been, but as lean, the Lord preserve us! as a monkey—but she had daughters to marry, heiresses two of them, girls with not half the faces of her daughters, although with double, treble their fortune. What honest mother does not feel injured by an injustice of that kind? yet the Countess was now all civility to Mrs. Lomax; she seemed disposed to embrace her on the spot; she complimented Mrs. Commyns on her good looks, her heart was full of joy, of light and happiness.

How well it is when things are going well with us. If every baby were only born with that mythical silver spoon in its mouth, what a much better man it would grow into. How smooth the ruggedness of life would become then, how much kinder towards each other we should all be. If Providence had only arranged it otherwise, and given to each individual some other lot in life than that which he actually holds, what universal contentment would follow.

Mrs. Commyns had been gathering flowers, and Lady Pomfret plucked away at the exotics in the verandah leading from the hall, to add to her prodigal bouquet. The lady admired some of them, and the Countess declared that the gardener should carry over the plants to Rosslyn ; the ladies were all mutual smiles and politeness, and a little mutually mystified perhaps at finding themselves nodding and smirking so amiably into each other's rival faces. But the Countess was not only polite and affable to Mrs. Commyns, to the saturnine, envious Mrs. Lomax, but even to George Montagu ; she

had a laughing sentence for him too, though he had been in the way from the beginning, and was notoriously not a marrying man.

Presently, when grateful Mrs. Cŏmmyns began to repay these compliments by wondering, in an artful, pleasant way, where Lord Lincoln could have hidden himself all the day, and feared that Lady Sophia might have gone astray also, as they had been seen together, everybody laughed except Mrs. Lomax, whose parchment brow contracted a deeper shade. Lady Pomfret fancied that her own joyful glistening eyes betrayed no emotion, no happy consciousness at this pleasant banter. She had no presentiment of what was coming presently, swiftly as the breeze which brought up a fleeting shadow before the now descending sun.

So the group of ladies stood laughing and saying pretty things to each other at the foot of the great staircase—it was a pleasant picture. The ascending line of dark oak balusters relieved by rows of carved and enamelled escutcheons. The sun, gleaming in slantwise through the pillars of the

entrance, touched the flowers, the satin petticoats, the shimmering suits of armour. A marble Cupid struggled with a swan in the centre of the hall, and at the foot of its pedestal the youngest Miss Lomax stood, dangling her garden hat by its apricot ribbon; the Countess thought her almost good-looking then. The small dollish face dimpling rosily at a pert compliment from George Montagu, and as it turned away a sunbeam seized the rippling flaxen hair.

A signal from the clock turret answered by a boom from the bronze dinner-bell went swinging over the lea, it stopped the rattle of the dice box in the gallery up stairs, roused Winnington from a doze in the library, and on the greensward by the river-side disturbed my Lord Alonzo the brave and the fair Imogene, who so lovingly sat and conversed there.

Lady Pomfret was deliberating whether to retire in order to avoid the scrutiny of her friends, when Lincoln and her daughter should presently enter the porch, but she did not retire.

Ah! What was that? the strange tightness of the heart seized the Countess again.

A cry!

Another scream, so near that it seemed in the hall itself, a piercing signal of human agony. "Murder!" In a distinct yet strange, unfamiliar tone the word came up. What was it? An answering cry of terror from Miss Lomax, who sank fainting at the foot of the Cupid, added to the confusion; but already the gentlemen had pushed open the door at the end of the wall, and, guided by fresh cries, penetrated into the house.

A sort of antechamber communicated with the servants' hall, and George Montagu, the first of the party, pushed back the door and entered. A strange sight presented itself there.

Lord Lempster was standing in the middle of the room in his breeches and waistcoat, a drawn sword in one hand, and in the other a bunch of lace which he had torn from the breast of another figure, who, with a chair projected in attitude of defence, was blocked up into the farthest corner of

the room. His face was deadly white, and the ruffle on his wrist dabbled with blood. This was the French valet, Monsieur Alphonse, Lord Lincoln's servant.

"Help! Miséricorde! Sauvez-moi, Messieurs—for the love of heaven, mi Lord, I have tell you I cannot chomp, I have done my best, I have the rheumatise à la jambe droite, and it is impossible what you ask, mi Lords; on m'assassine, au secours! Mi Lord est tout-à-fait hors de lui."

"Stay, Lempster, what is it all about?" inquired Montagu, answering the appeal, catching Lord Lempster by the arm.

But the other shook himself loose, and bounding over the intervening bench, in a husky voice as unsteady as his legs, bawled out, "Jump, you cowardly brute, jump for my wager, or I'll spit you like a rat! Shall I put money on a d— parley voo Johnny Crapaud of a dancing master who won't jump? There is but a minute to spare, clear over the table or—" and my Lord flourished his weapon aloft in a sort of zig-zag circle, but his

feet were rickety and awkward, and the blade scraped the flags in an eccentric swoop.

"Lempster!" Montagu seized his arm firmly.

"Here I have betted with Dicky Thornton that this Monseer would clear that table in a standing jump, and the beast refuses to do it, wants to lose my money for nothing," called out Lempster in an expostulating tone.

"Le moyen de jomper avec un mal de jambe comme ça," pleaded the valet; "I appeal to all the milords, it is impossible."

"Time ish up, and so money ish mine," hiccupped out young Squire Thornton, who stood apart with a watch from each of his fobs in each of his hands, his peruke over his nose, and an idiotic leer on his drunken face.

"Then I'll have the value of it in kind, if the money is gone," bawls out Lempster; "shall I be baulked by a jibbering, jabbering knave in my own house?" and he shook his sword arm free for another lunge.

"If you don't jump for my pieces you shall for my

pleasure, by—— you shall for your life, or leave it here behind you," he repeated, reeling forward.

But some one threw a cloak nimbly over the weapon, and he was disarmed in a trice, while the valet bounded over the seat like a hare, and as he escaped scared the ladies gathered in the doorway with his bloody wrist and ruffles.

"Be careful, Lempster, you fool, that's Lincoln's man! don't expose yourself before the people," whispered Montagu. "Get away to your own room quietly, you have frightened all the women; a nice morning's work; you are not fit to be seen, go!"

"Not so easy to frighten them, the women, as you think; I know better than that," replied Lord Lempster, with a cunning leer.

"That is Lincoln's valet, I tell you!"

"Well, and is not Lincoln to marry my sister?" —he pronounced it thisther—"and shall I not pink his knave in my own house, and he my own brother-in-law? who will prevent me?" roars out Lempster with desperate distinctness, considering his lisp.

"What call have you to interfere between members of the same family? I say Lincoln must pay my loss to Dickey Thornton, on account of his fellow, or he shan't have Sophia, so that's all about it," added Lempster, staring in a wondering way at the faces which kept crowding in the doorway. "If he likes to square up with the squire, then he must come and shake hands on it like a man. Huff! My mother!" catching sight of a marble face in the doorway. He made two quick, ineffectual passes to get his sword into the scabbard, then turned on his rickety heels, and was hustled off through the opposite door towards the servants' hall.

"That part of the performance was not in the play-bill possibly," said Mrs. Commyns of Rosslyn to Mrs. Lomax from behind her fan, as the two ladies went up to dress for dinner immediately afterwards, while every person was talking, or thinking of the awkward scene.

"Fearful! I cannot jest about it; I regret so much having ever come to this house, on

account of the girls," said Mrs. Lomax. "There is such an air of duplicity about the whole set here. I don't feel 'tis a respectable house at all; the shock of this dreadful affair is too much for me."

"Duplicity! Surely nothing could surpass the candour of my Lord Lempster in every particular; that was altogether charming, Mrs. Lomax."

"Such a man! on the high road to perdition. He has it in his expression. Did you observe his face?"

"Did you observe his *mother's* face? that was best worth looking at, when he made the disclosure about Lord Lincoln and the family hopes," said Mrs. Commyns; "blurting it out before everybody too: even Mr. Montagu did not know how to hold himself. I really pitied Lady Pomfret then."

"She deserves no pity; 'tis shameful the way they have hunted my Lord Lincoln, both the mother and daughter, the whole set of them. I should not so demean myself, nor have one of my girls spoken of in that way for all the dukes in England. I think she deserves exposure."

"And I, though I doubt if she commands it, that she deserves success, if only for her courage and perseverance," laughed Mrs. Commyns. "Aye and for her skill; but that will be taxed to get out of this affair. I wonder how Lincoln will take it, when he hears; but he seems very much in love. See; very much in love," and she stood at the lobby window pointing as Lord Lincoln and Lady Sophia entered the house from the garden. He had a flurried look; it might have been from mental excitement, or from physical heat, or from a consciousness of having presently to meet a crowd of inquiring eyes; but Lincoln's was not a very expressive face, and any emotion that stirred him usually produced only the same flush in his colour and awkwardness in his attitude. Mrs. Commyns, peering through the window, decided that the something in Lady Sophia's face meant "consciousness," and so she translated it.

"It is all right; she has him at last," the lady exclaimed, brightening up at the envy which twinkled in the black eyes staring above her

shoulder. "She has drawn her prize, and Lord Lempster was in the right to plead the privilege of brother-in-lawhood to amuse himself with Lord Lincoln's Frenchman—it is a family affair now—there will be no scandal. The coup has succeeded, and the lookers-on may all go about their business; the curtain has but to fall; the lights will be snuffed out presently; we have but to order our coaches and depart. The performance at Easton Neston is over for the season."

CHAPTER XIV.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

How Lady Pomfret ever got safe away to the sanctuary of her chamber is a mystery; what countenance she bore when running the gauntlet of those friendly eyes which had witnessed the scandal may be imagined. But when the door had closed she fairly broke down in tears. She was not of the weeping order, with her tears were a rare indulgence, but it relieved her head, and helped her to revive from the first dazed sensation of helpless imbecility, which was the immediate effect of the shock. Her son had swept away that fine network of policy which she had been at such pains to weave. One swoop and all was gone! It was maddening to survey the mischief, to think that in a drunken freak a reckless sot should have done so much evil;

people would talk about the affair, and, embellished and exaggerated, it would finally come to Lincoln's ears. Oh! she could have stabbed him, Lempster, not Lincoln, on the spot.

But, the first excitement over, Lady Pomfret imagined that something might be attempted to mitigate the evil effect of this accident, and the consciousness of possibly being able to remedy the mishap immediately restored her to her faculties, and subdued her temper. She touched her bell, and Mrs. Rogers, the housekeeper, arrived trembling after the former scene, but the Countess had recovered her ordinary tone of familiarity and confidence, and Mrs. Rogers was received with kindness. "She must be aware of what has happened downstairs." The Countess introduced the subject point-blank. "Lord Lempster and his friends had been refreshing themselves, and had, perhaps, taken too much wine, as young men will; the heat of the day was chiefly to blame for it; there had been a frolic and a servant was, unfortunately, hurt —a Frenchman, she believed. Mrs. Rogers had

better have this man up to her rooms, and see that he had every attention. It was important to keep him away from the servants, and very essential to keep tongues quiet. As well send for the village doctor immediately. Meanwhile, she would come herself after dinner and judge of the servant's state; she confided everything to the skill and discretion of Mrs. Rogers;" who went away with a perfect understanding of the state of affairs, and a determination to apply a poultice to the vanity, as well as to the wounds, of the injured lackey, and to stop his mouth, if any recipe in the still-room could be found to do it with.

Then the dinner table was to be faced, and there was, fortunately, just time enough to dress for the ordeal of being stared at. Dinner was not yet the cumbrous proceeding of modern times, and being frequently followed by open air exercise, elaborate evening costumes were reserved for rare and state occasions.

But the Countess decided that her toilet should be complete and splendid.

So waiting-women were summoned, costly silks and laces selected. The jewel casket was unlocked, the amethyst suit which Lady Sophia sometimes wore. Diamonds! she paused at diamonds; but, no matter if over-dressed; it was not a mere question of correct taste now; but it was all-important to flaunt hardily into the gaze of her enemy, the world, and not to appear to crouch before its sneers.

So the Countess clasped on her bracelets as a knight would his gauntlets, mounted her bravest ornaments as a general going into action would his state uniform, his medals and orders. She was going into action. There was the smiling Mrs. Commyns, that jealous hypocritical Mrs. Lomax, Montagu, and the rest of them to be faced. These were to be encountered at the bayonet's point, and her heart did not waver at the prospect of battle, but, when fully accoutred, she gave a scream—the mirror revealed all that she had suffered—the ghost which appeared there frightened her; that face with its hollowness and pallor, the weary ex-

pression! Defeat and cowardice lay in that pale reflection, her good looks had already taken flight; but there was a certain remedy for this. She quickly unlocked the private cabinet, that wherein the flask lay, and took out various dyes and brushes and tinctures. Rouge, that a skilful Italian artist only had the secret of. She undid the cunningly-sealed jar and proceeded to lay the war paint on, staring hard to bring the spirit back into those betraying eyes.

A happy and brilliant hostess appeared presently in the dining-room. Mrs. Commyns stared; the diamonds and brocade took her breath away; while Mrs. Lomax turned her modest eyes aside from those purple eyelashes and crimsoned cheeks —then she said:

"This is by way of putting us down; it makes me ashamed before all these men; I hardly dare to turn that way; it is sad, it is very barefaced," venturing another look.

"And very bare-shouldered also, a woman of her years," responded Mrs. Commyns, waving her

fan; "the idea of putting well-bred people down with a faded blue satin that won't meet at the back, not by half an inch at the bottom laces; you can see when she turns round to Dr. Hatherly."

"Sky blue, and turning green at the edges and eyelet holes," said Mrs. Lomax. "I remember that old satin perfectly well. Oh, a sad worldly mind!"

The daughter has already conveyed tidings of the affair. She must have done so; no doubt she has had her offer; that is what sets her up in such feather.

"She hasn't any sense of the higher duties; more shame for her," whispered Mrs. Lomax. "Pray attend to her conversation; listen how irreverent, how flippant! Such curtness, and with one's parish pastor in one's own house too; what an example to one's children!"

"And she has apparently added theology to the list of her attainments besides: that comes, I suppose, of outlandish fashions and residence in Popish countries," said Mrs. Commyns, who had

been for three years trying to wheedle Commyns into making the grand tour.

"Such an example of a wife and mother, 'tis simply dreadful to listen to her!" Mrs. Lomax shuddered. "It would be a relief to me if Letitia were but out of earshot. Letitia is so readily scandalised by the introduction of sacred subjects in profane language."

This remark was provoked by a few sentences which passed between the rector and the Countess, for since entering the room Lady Pomfret had gone on tilting point-blank against a variety of subjects in succession, and in a manner which might be best described as reckless and rattling; she was struggling all the time against a consciousness of failure in the attempt to appear indifferent, and at ease.

From one topic to the other she went in a bounding way, skimming along by mere force of inward heat. It was not easy to sustain things at such a rate of volubility, considering the flimsy texture of the conversational material to hand; but

it was easier to talk than not, under the staring eyes of these two horrible women.

Proceeding in this strain, she found herself presently in the embrasure of the larger window declaiming, in a grand doctrinal, but vehemently at-random tone, on some point of the doctrine of futurity. Dr. Hatherly, the village rector, was the immediate listener. Anything for a subject. The immortality of the soul was at this moment one for which she cared as little as for the mortality of the guinea fowl, but she was running bare of material, and fell into theological loftiness, out of sheer poverty of invention, to the solid dismay of the subservient and not brilliant nor learned rector, who had not calculated on being driven into the profundities of a bottomless subject by such a person as his hostess, before an audience of quizzing gentility with appetites for dinner. In truth, it was a high honour for him to be given a place among such an array of guests at all, and he was very much on his good behaviour, and sensibly discomforted at finding

himself driven into talking, or rather answering, shop, for the good man did no more than follow her Ladyship's lead, and that at a halting monosyllabic pace, under a crushing sensation of neither shining nor edifying.

"I met a cardinal at Rome," Lady Pomfret began afresh, taking up one of the myriad threads of the very ravelled subject. "A very clever man, and learned, though his views were essentially popish, who held that one might encourage and cultivate a consciousness of spiritual responsibility in oneself, exactly as any sensible sense, like that of colour, say. Some people have no sensations about colour, not naturally, unless they develop them by education. If you had read the lives of the painters, or walked the galleries of Italy, you would understand how true this is in regard to art. And art, after all, is everything—for some people it is a religion; but you have not been much abroad, Doctor; what I intend to say is, that if the sense of responsibility, which, I suppose, is conscience, be a mere sensation, like any other that one may encourage or not,

then we are free to let it alone if we please; and that brings me back indirectly to the point I started from, that one is free to have a conscience or not. If conscience be a thing which is to be encouraged or trained like the muscles of the body, brought to perfection by exercise, are there then such things as gymnastics of the soul?"

Mrs. Lomax rested her eyes on the ceiling in a glimmering way.

"The Fathers have very decided views on that point," said the rector in a shuffling accent, conscious that Montagu, lolling within earshot on a tabouret behind the elder Miss Lomax, had his eyeglass raised; "I think we must accept the views of the Fathers, and need not trouble ourselves any further."

"But without taking any trouble to cultivate a conscience, may a person get to heaven without one?—that's what I want to get at," said Lady Pomfret. "It would be so much easier to let things be, without any trouble; may one go there without gymnastics, suppose?"

"How can your ladyship ask, when one sees people going there every day in an easy amble —fat elderly people afflicted with spiritual asthma, who could not take any short cuts even if they were necessary," said Montagu, "and who proceed agreeably enough, or at least without any visible trouble from conscience or interior misgivings of any kind."

"Of course good people will go to heaven," said the rector, feeling that he was so far sound.

"Good every-day people, those one meets at dinner, not saints in hair shirts," said Montagu; "honest folk who quarrel with the sherry, and snooze at sermons, and take short turns on their neighbours, and don't love them any more than they do their enemies; and we should be much surprised if they did. 'Twould be horrible to think that such people are going anywhere but to heaven, and if anywhere else—where to, Doctor?"

"You should read Bourdaloue, sir, allow me to suggest; in my student days, I went through a course. Bourdaloue! I may say I sucked him in

with my mother's milk in large doses; he fortifies one spiritually—a most excellent tonic; I make it a rule to recommend Bourdaloue in cases of interior conflict."

"The upshot is," said Lady Pomfret, "that a conscience is a luxury of the æsthetic kind, very pretty and pleasant and refined, and so forth, but no more a necessity of life than music or painting is—nor so much so, in fact."

"Servants should have consciences, though," added Montagu, "or they will borrow your clothes, and steal, and make life miserable; the meaner sorts of people should be encouraged to develop a sense of responsibility, or we never would have dinner served in time;" and he glanced across the simpering imbecility of the pretty Miss Lomax beside him to the Louis XIV. clock on the mantelpiece, where a china Cupid with a pallet and maul-stick indicated that the hand had crossed the hour ten minutes since.

"Quite true, quite true," said Lord Pomfret aloud, in a responsive tone, from the hearth-rug,

catching up the remark; "the dinner hour is sacred; there should be punctuality, but it is all Lempster's fault, always the way; one always waits for him, he takes such a long time getting up his hair. In my day young men were less foppish. They were more for learning and parts than at present, and English tailors were good enough for us in our day—eh, Commyns—but now unless a thing comes from Paris it's nothing. Everything Frenchified and womanish."

"Well, I don't come from Paris, and I consider myself something neither Frenchified nor womanish," said Mr. Commyns huskily, a florid substantial man, with a full chest and throat, and so red in the face that he looked throttled in his tight clothes.

"Ah, yes! you are English to the backbone, no mistake about it, and you have always lived on your estate, that is why everything is in such order at Curraglass. You are right, quite right, but you should have woodcocks at Curraglass, by-the-way, shouldn't you," inquired his Lordship, "in

those larch screens by the river? Now I never find myself riding in that direction, but I say, well, if any man in the country has woodcocks, Commyns ought. A great comfort a shot at a cock with your own people without any state or fuss, when a man lives on his own estate, but there are difficulties sometimes, peculiarities in the lie of the ground. Now anybody can have pheasants; but wild game is disappearing from this end of the county, I'm sorry to say. I protest, if Lempster does not appear, I shall send up for him, he won't like that; he chooses to have his own way. Young men do, they are so independent now, Commyns; but you don't know, you know nothing about it from experience, not having children; I forgot that." Mr. Commyns squirms uneasily; this is a sore subject, and, with characteristic tact, my Lord fastens on it, as if on purpose.

"Ah! I had forgot—true; but you are a lucky fellow, you keep tinkering up your place, nothing else to spend your money on. I wish I could take a leaf out of your book; that my lady were content

to stop here for awhile, and not go capering away to town and elsewhere; we have had enough of it for my taste; but when a man has married a clever woman he must pay the penalty, that's where it is. If my wife were not a genius now, then it would be different, we would have a quieter life of it. You have no idea of the time I spent abroad going hither and thither improving our minds and one thing or other; but 'tis a great trial to a woman of genius to live in the country, and the longer I live, the more I see the necessity of being ruled by one's wife, especially when she's clever; so I always give way, 'tis the best plan; better for both of us to do so; though I would have got on well enough, I daresay, with any sort of woman, an ordinary sort, even, with one that let me have a way of my own sometimes, and was not a genius, for my name is Easy," said my Earl, "my name is Easy, Commyns."

"But you have been so much abroad now, that even for sake of variety you might rest awhile in the country," observed Mr. Commyns moodily.

"Exactly as I say, but she won't hear of it; and what are you to do? hush! she might overhear; and I always give way, I make it a point to yield; 'tis on that account, I may say, that ever since we were married—my wife and I—we never have had a word of difference; 'tis a principle with me not to differ, it maintains peace, especially when there is a family. But you have no children, I always forget that; sometimes a great comfort to a man to be without them; often a good deal of uncertainty about children—how they may turn out, and that sort of thing. You are better off than you fancy, Commyns—far better off."

"I'm content with my lot. You never hear me complain," growled Mr. Commyns.

"As a rule, I should say a great comfort not to have any children; I don't say so myself, for I am differently placed; being so lucky, my lady being such a clever woman, she takes all the bother off my hands; but every man is not so fortunate in a wife. Generally speaking, however, children are in one's way—there is Lempster,

for instance, no getting him to observe punctuality, even for dinner. No getting him; he is never in time at table. I really think we had better not wait for him any longer, Harry, my love," said his Lordship, making a pace forward towards the window with a watch in his hand. "Young Thornton, too, where is he? they are always together. What can Lempster be about? Curling his hair, humph! and we half famished, Commyns and I. Oh, I beg pardon, my love, I meant nothing, only we are all ready for table long ago. Waiting on Lempster's account, it is very provoking."

"But Lord Lincoln has not yet appeared; we are waiting for him also," interposed George Montagu, with rare good-nature.

"Eh, Lincoln! oh ay! Lincoln, to be sure, I did not notice that. Lempster is so often the one in fault that I had not thought of anybody else; naturally it's out of the question going to dinner without him; we wait for Lord Lincoln as a matter of course;" and Lord Pomfret fumbles a

rapid retreat back to the territory of the hearth-rug, tangling in an awkward chair and puzzled in his soul at the scowl which came to him from the varnished eyebrows of his wife. He was aware of a talent for impromptu blunderings, and was indefinitely conscious of having now put his foot somewhere in the wrong place. It was odd that a man so well disposed to obey the conjugal helm as he was should invariably steer badly.

George Montagu was making a mental note to remember to send the history of the day's events in his letter to Horace Walpole, when the Countess stood up with a pouting face. She was annoyed that Montagu should have come, as it were, to her assistance; being in humour to strike out at everybody, friend and foe were alike to her then; as she continued conversing with the parson, her eyes maintained the same searching attitude, shifting from Montagu to Mrs. Commyns in a staring, bellicose way.

Montagu was provoked at her attitude.

"Is my Lord Lincoln always *en rétard?* An unhappy peculiarity for those who love him, I imagine," he said, addressing Mrs. Commyns.

A loud "hush!" and visions of the matron's substantial dimples came flickering through the rapid movements of her fan; she was trying to look as if trying not to laugh outright.

But Lady Pomfret was not to be provoked by clumsy impertinence, and with an air of affected absence, continued the dialogue with the rector.

"It is such a fatal mistake for a preacher to suffer sallies of wit to trickle into his sermon," she said, again catching up the subject. "You are aware of Dr. Swift's opinion on the point? and the Doctor gives his reasons for it: first, he says a clergyman should not be smart in the pulpit, because the chances are a million to one that he hasn't any wit—" Lady Pomfret paused: Montagu and Mrs. Commyns were still whispering in a quizzing, underbred way. "What a pity, now, Mr. Montagu did not enter the Church," she added, tartly; "he would have made a figure with

his wit there; he has already almost enough to acquire a reputation as a private gentleman: if he had only carried his parts into a cassock, Mr. Montagu's wit might have made a bishop of him."

"I don't think it is much of a qualification for the sacred Bench; I wonder your Ladyship thinks so," gasps the rector, bluntly not seeing at all where he was.

"The worst of having wit is the temptation to show it off, and Mr. Montagu does not always overcome the temptation," said Mrs. Commyns, with a clumsy archness. "After all, wit is the beauty of the mind, and, like a beautiful face, should be exhibited to view as much as possible. But, talking of views, what a sunset! what a view from where I sit; the most charming picture!" added Mrs. Commyns, straining to see beside or above the figure of her hostess, which intercepted the prospect. "Though I have always been against western aspects, on account of the evening glare, yet this is magnificent, and this window is exquisitely placed. We have no sunsets like this

at Curraglass, the hill comes exactly in the way for us. Now, Mr. Montagu, do bridle your wit and let me enjoy this view at ease; it will be gone in a moment, while your remarks will keep; you keep one so on the rack, following your sallies."

"You are very kind to admire it, but we have no landscape here to compare with the park at Curraglass," said Lady Pomfret grimly. "It must be a paradise there after all your recent improvements; your own taste, I daresay, not having the duties of a family to distract you; you have abundant leisure. Then you have mountains, too—a great, advantage, a great boon to have mountains; and we are so flat—plenty of green here, but no blues and purples. One can't have blues without mountains, no atmospheric effects; my early artistic education has spoiled me for commonplace scenery; I am *blasé* on trees, so much of them everywhere; but atmosphere—breadth. You understand? Mr. Montagu, I daresay, understands what I mean by breadth."

"I thought the view by the river charming to-day, however," said Mrs. Commyns tartly; "though, not being an artist, I daresay I did not understand it; it looked charming, however; but all your clever people are often hard to please, and always hard to be understood."

"Is this another of the clever people who are difficult to please or to be understood?" asked Montagu, with a sufficiently impertinent simper. As he spoke a rustling by the door, and Lord Lincoln entered, striding directly across the room to the Countess, apologizing for his lateness in quick spasmodic sentences, and gesticulating in a way not usual to him. It might have been the flurry of a man who had kept people waiting dinner, and the Countess answered by chiding him playfully, leaving the flurry to be accounted for in that way. Dr. Hatherly gave a gasp of relief at the interlude, and profited by it to make his escape from the vicinity of the Countess to that of Mrs. Lomax, whom he had been appointed to take down to dinner. Mr. Commyns, in re-

sponse to the movement, crossed in a plunging way through the loungers and rickety rococo stands and ornaments to where Harriet Montagu sat, his appointed prize. This gave an impulse for more rising and movement; George Montagu stood puzzled between the twin Misses Lomax. Lady Pomfret caught a signal from the footman standing by the door, which suddenly flew back on both wings.

"What, Lempster left in the lurch after all! I am very glad of it, serves him out," exclaimed Lord Pomfret, rushing at the last moment to bow to the wrong lady, as was his invariable habit, and discovering his mistake, cutting his bow in the middle, and with a rapid wheel offering his arm to the right lady, who rose very slowly, her silk skirts giving out a grim rustle of offence—and dinner was announced.

When the business of dinner had set in, the Countess had leisure to look around and relax the forced manner and tension of effort; she could afford to remain silent now, and wanted to look

into the faces of her daughter and Lord Lincoln without having to guard against the prying criticism of other eyes; but she was perplexed to find that both the objects of her interest were placed on her own side of the table, perversely out of the range of vision. She could make nothing out of tantalising glimpses in mere profile; when suddenly Lord Lincoln set her in a flutter of anxiety and perplexity by inquiring aloud if any one had letters or commissions for town, as he intended leaving for London in the morning; he should quit the house at daybreak, rest during the heat of the day, and travel on all night.

This in the most indifferent tone; then, by way of explanation, he added, that letters had reached him in the afternoon, which made an immediate departure imperative.

During the various exclamations and polite requests provoked by this announcement, Lady Sophia never stirred. At that critical moment her face was bent in apparent occupation with her plate, but it was a happy and a radiant

face. Her mother obtained just one glimpse, and was reassured. It had come at last then, the Countess decided, the happy event so long prayed for and expected. He had taken the final step, and was going away to make the announcement to his relatives in form. How the old tiger uncle Newcastle would fume, and the whole gang of Pelham conspirators despair, when they heard of this summer's morning work at Easton Neston!

The present joy of this revelation extinguished the worry of previous anxieties; at first it was so, but there was a make-weight following it in another mortification, as an evening drive had been arranged for the ladies, and Lady Pomfret had to form a third in the chaise with Mrs. Commyns and Mrs. Lomax, instead of having Lady Sophia all to herself upstairs and coaxing out the whole happy news in every detail before bedtime. But it came to the same thing in the end, as Lord Lincoln and Lady Sophia did not appear in the drawing-room after dinner, but,

slipping out to the shrubbery as the company went upstairs, arranged to have this last evening quite to themselves. It was only natural after what had happened. Oh, the Countess was a happy mother!

The evening was radiant and calm; even the orange gardens of the Ridolfi never gave out such odours as these English bowers; woodbine, thyme and roses distilled by the departed heat filled the garden. Winged insects swam honey-surfeited through the tawny twilight and came booming down into the grass drunk with scents. By the old garden wall the perfume of the night-scented stock loaded the air; and as the lovers passed into that leafiest corner of the garden, a pair of wood-doves which had rendezvous there burst from the laurels.

The glare of a dying sunset was yet in the heavens, but ere the wanderers returned to the house the white moonlight had begun to trickle down through the silent leaves. Still on the terrace there was something more to be said, and eavesdropping housemaids told afterwards

how my Lord had taken my Lady Sophia by the hand, and retained his prize during the final tour on the terrace, and as they parted had plucked a clematis blossom from the pedestal of Psyche's statue by the fountain, and that she had pinned it in her bosom, and worn it later on, before them all, at the faro-table. The busy Lady Pomfret was not at her place at the card-table that night when the lovers reappeared. She had again been called on to perform efficient service in another quarter. Lord Lincoln's intention of departure caused her to reflect on the mishap to his valet, and brought a return of anxiety regarding its consequences. How if the man was hurt and could not quit the house with his master?—then the whole story must come out.

If Lempster had only preserved decent behaviour for another day, what a happy woman she might have been that night! but as things were she was miserably anxious. Then she reflected that even if her son had murdered the Frenchman on the spot it could not interfere with Lady Sophia's

prospects, now that Lord Lincoln had committed himself by a direct avowal. There was deep consolation in that, so she sailed away to the housekeeper's quarters in a good Samaritan frame of mind, intending to bind up the wounds of the outraged valet, and seal up his tongue likewise, if any efficient recipe in the family medicine chest could be found to stop his mouth with.

Happily, the valet turned out to be more frightened than hurt—a mere scrape on the wrist; and the village practitioner having prescribed sticking-plaster and a bandage, had his supper in the housekeeper's room and disappeared.

Monsieur Alphonse had been in many a scrape before, but never so lucky a one as that which Lord Lempster's steel had given him. He lay upon the sofa in Mrs. Rogers' parlour with his arm in a sling, and every delicacy that the house afforded, on a dumb waiter ready to his hand—his other hand—the doctor had not barred stimulants, and a flask of champagne simmered at his elbow. Under the influence of this gentle

treatment, the ferocity of his Gallic nature began gradually to decline from its first fervour. At the outset, when his scattered sense had recovered sufficiently for words, his threats of vengeance were atrocious. "Mi Lord Lempstere was to hang at Tyburn for the outrage. He would claim justice of the law, and milord, *son maître*, would see that it was relentlessly administered. The *sang français* in his veins had been spilt by a *brutal*. It cried to heaven and to la France for vengeance. If the court of law did not hang milord Lempstere he would appeal to Son Excellence l'ambassadeur Monsieur Le Comte de Nouailles, and a war between the two countries would in all likelihood follow."

At this stage the Countess entered and dismissed Rogers. In spite of his bleeding grievance, Alphonse was disconcerted and slightly overpowered at the unforeseen honour of this visit. He would have risen to receive milady, but prompt as thought her jewelled arm was extended to prevent him. "He must not stir, though looking, heaven be praised! better than she had

hoped. She could not rest until satisfied in person that it was nothing serious. Such a shocking affair! Her son had forgot himself, and to-morrow, when reason returned, would be the first to deplore the unhappy occurrence. It was all that odious Mr. Thornton, a *mauvais sujet*, who had induced him to drink. After all, young men will be wild sometimes. You must understand that, being a young man yourself, Monsieur Alphonse"—she purred (he was forty-five)—"you will understand that excesses will break out sometimes; and, however deplorable, in fact do not always point to badness of the heart. Poor Lempster! he has a good heart at bottom, but a bad head, and company always leads him astray. Can you forgive, Monsieur Alphonse? can you, for my sake, suppose that this miserable affair has never taken place? I throw myself on your compassion—a mother pleading for an erring son; you are a man of feeling and of sentiment like all of your gallant nation; you will understand my solicitude."

"Ah, madame, miladi, vous me comblez"—Alphonse could not proceed beyond the ejaculatory stage. "She spoke to me like a dear friend—like my own sainted mother," he said afterwards, when narrating the scene to Mr. Screw, the Duke of Newcastle's man, who jeered at the tender-hearted and sympathetic Frenchman.

But an inconceivable occurrence followed: Alphonse had had many successes among the sex, both in his own and our foreign land, but never anything to compare with this. His fine eyes shone with vanity and amazement as the Countess produced a small mother-of-pearl case, and touching a spring, the open lid disclosed a small diamond pin, such as a gentleman might wear in his jabot —a neglected trinket which she had borrowed from "my Earl's" dressing-case. "I am determined," she said, "that as a set-off to the outrage of which you have been the victim you shall at least bear away from Easton Neston one slight token of the esteem and gratitude of its mistress—gratitude for the silence which I expect you to

maintain on the unfortunate occurrence of this morning.

"The trinket is prettily set, you will observe; such workmanship as only the jewellers of your nation can accomplish; and the diamond is the finest water. When you wear it let it be a souvenir of the pledge which I expect you to make me now that the secret of this unhappy scandal shall never pass the loyal bosom which this diamond adorns."

Alphonse was overcome; it was not in his sensitive and fervid nature to resist an appeal coming in such form from a lady, and a lady of rank, and he pledged himself. Didn't he swear in the expressive language of his country and kind to comply with her gracious desires? He had no longer any memory of the affair, nor was it in the power of his tongue to shape words which might disclose it to mortal ears, nor in any part of his nature to do anything whatever which might give one moment's annoyance to Miladi La Comtesse.

And Alphonse was sincere in his promises;

he was of as average a truthfulness, perhaps, as any member of his profession; but the inherent boastfulness of his disposition often betrayed him into regretable indiscretions. He would undoubtedly have kept his word with her Ladyship if the artful Screw had not crossed his path to beguile him from the strict path of virtue and truthfulness, and that speedily.

It was only a few days later on, after returning to town, that it occurred. Alphonse had mounted his fine diamond to dazzle the Duke's man, and Mr. Screw had acknowledged the compliment by pooh-poohing at the pin, declaring in his off-hand grand way that 'twas mere pretence, only a trumpery paste affair unworthy to glimmer on any gentleman's bosom.

Alphonse was naturally hurt; first, that a man of Mr. Screw's consequence should think him capable of wearing paste, next at the staring untruthfulness of the statement itself. It was more than the average Frenchman could endure—a jewel presented by a Countess out of pure regard

to be so disparaged. So he flared up, and words rose between them; but Screw would not bate a jot of his arrogance and conceit until Alphonse was obliged to knock both down flat by a detailed statement of the whole affair at Easton Neston from beginning to end; but under the strictest pledge of secresy. You should have seen Screw's face then when in possession of the merits of the story, how crest-fallen he looked, how humbly he admitted his error and apologised for his ignorant and disparaging criticisms. Yet his sharp eyes glistened as he examined the diamond, while ardently assuring Alphonse that the precious secret was safe in his custody; that his word of honour was as clear and genuine as the jewel itself; and the confiding Parisian believed him—yet Screw turned out a monster of perfidy, as we shall presently discover.

CHAPTER XV.

A DISCLOSURE.

It required some self-denial on the part of the Countess to abstain from entering her daughter's room that night when the guests had retired. She had hoped to obtain a history of the events of the day from her own lips. Lady Sophia had disappeared with the first departures from the drawing-room, and her mother sat alone in her dressing-room expecting her tap at the door, but the hours drew on, and the pleasure of it was to be deferred to the morning.

The pleasure of an avowal from her daughter's own lips that is; so far it was an unmixed joy; but as for the engagement to Lord Lincoln, oddly enough, now that attainment of her dream was apparently reached, the elation of her spirits was

merely moderate. She was not conscious of a sufficient interior buoyancy to match with the splendour of the event. There was a perceptible blankness, as inexplicable to herself as unaccountable by exterior causes; a strange indifference incompatible with the conviction of possession. The complex incidents of the past days might have caused this weariness in some degree; so severe a mental strain had perhaps momentarily deadened her sensibility, or else an eruption of mere temper had in a capricious moment come to snatch away the joy which should have been an attribute of her good fortune, or this numbness might be accounted for by physical causes—sleeplessness. She was not usually of such unstable health as to be disturbed by a few nights' vigil, but she was content to think that it might be—that age perhaps was beginning to show itself in diminished power of endurance of physical fatigue, or of undergoing the tension of anxiety. Anything was better than a suspicion that the deep-rooted sustaining worldliness of her character was wavering, that she was in any

degree losing the old thirst for success and progress for achievement and attainment, in the positive and tangible form of worldly honours and possessions. What loneliness if that were so! Where was she to turn then? what worship to set up in place of the ancient gods if these—the best of them—should turn out to be mere dumb idols of wood and stone, now that she had mounted the higher steps of the altar, and was by right of possession to command all that these secular divinities had in them to bestow? If the world were really as hollow as it was preached to be, then life had nothing for her beyond. This marriage meant everything that she had most coveted; it secured the elevation of the entire family, the future position of the other children, and practically left her nothing further to aspire to. A glance forward, and she saw herself presently in the new and odd position of having nothing further to desire or to pursue; for an artizan spirit like hers whose existence had hitherto been all restlessness, this was a startling glimpse of an un-

wholesome future. She was, in a word, beginning already to realize the paltriness of mere possession beside that wealth of anticipation in which she had hitherto revelled. Yet the possible approach of this mental change was faintly indicated; the pulp of thought had not hardened into lines and form. She was merely aware of incompleteness vaguely, and of an unpleasant intrusion of the sensation in a moment which should be one of all-satisfying happiness and triumph. An inconsistency which is not uncommon, but it was new to her.

In a while she dozed away from dreams to sleep, and woke in the grey of the summer morning to catch the swish of Lord Lincoln's carriage-wheels on the drive under her windows. She had a glimpse of his travelling chariot winding beyond the elms of the park. Now that he had gone a sudden anxiety concerning the object of his journey seized her again; it dissipated the remnant of mental feebleness which still hung like a vapour about her thoughts, and deep and fervent was the blessing which she invoked upon his adventure.

The moment came at last!

After breakfast she followed Lady Sophia to her room, that is, the Countess escaped from the table as soon after as her duties as hostess permitted.

But Lady Sophia was not in her chamber. Here was another of the oddities which were hanging about the conduct of her daughter. The Countess expected to find her waiting. She must have understood how her maternal interest at least was excited, if nothing was due to the earnest maternal solicitude which she might equally well have supposed to be on the rack.

Then the mother learned that her daughter had gone out alone by the orchard walk, and inquiries from the gardeners directed her westward through the plantation to the view point. The Countess followed, burning inwardly. It was natural, perhaps, that Sophia should choose to be alone, but some consideration was due to others. It was not so natural that she should have the air of flying from an interview, from a confidence—there had hitherto been full confidence between them on

this supreme subject. Then a doubt darkened the brow of the Countess—what if *he* had made some condition excluding her formally from a share in their secrets! Lady Pomfret's instinct was shrewd enough to divine that such a condition was not improbable, her daughter might be endeavouring merely to fulfil the conditions of a promise which might have been wrung from her. The mother knew that she would be loyal enough to keep her word if it had been pledged.

The birds were twittering under the espaliers in the beautiful morning. Pinks, lavender, and roses, spread their scents across the path, and now the shadow of the heavy forest trees was gained, for the shafts of light fell slantwise still. It would be late in the forenoon before a broad, direct sun illumined the whole garden at once. As yet the plantations barred out the light—Lord Pomfret was always talking about those trees; they were abominable to his vegetarian aspirations, a standing reproach to a man so deservedly proud of the productiveness of his kitchen-garden.

He would have levelled them long ago if he might; but the trees were under the special protection of her ladyship's good taste, and woe to the finger which bared a bough: true, at each summer visit he satisfied his conscience, by renewing his resolution of "doing something next winter about those trees," that were causing such visible mischief to the peas and scarlet runners, and drawing the turnips; but my earl's "name was Easy." The winter came and went, and the trees remained to preserve this end of the garden as a deliciously cool retreat in the dog-days, and to remind my lord of his enduring conjugal subserviency.

There was a wicket at the end, and the path beyond led into the wood proper, through a tangle of creepers, ivies, and mosses, and such sparse underwood as could vegetate reluctantly on a foundation of protruding rock; hence the way led onwards to the view-point, climbing up the intervening ledges, now and then giving a glimpse through the foliage of the bright western landscape to the right. There was a sweep of the

river with vivid light upon it, behind the blocks of oak—not mere sun-brown shadows near, and greys beyond—the whole widening with a sort of spring to right and left as the plateau of the view-point was reached. Here was a summerhouse, and an end of blue silk fringe stirred by the rustic porch—Lady Sophia was there.

If Lady Pomfret had not had her eyes turned inside—been absorbed in the study of her own sensations—she would have been quick to see the shudder which passed over her daughter's face, but when she did raise her eyes, they were blinded in the glare of her inward exaltation; besides, mothers have a wilful, headlong way of treating daughters in the position of Lady Sophia, and Lady Pomfret's characteristic in any given situation was wilfulness; it was the essence of her nature. Moreover, it was then not of supreme importance to understand with what degree of joy her daughter received this full realization of happiness, the vital thing was to be told quickly upon what basis the fulfilment of it rested—it was not a time

to take note of girlish caprices or inconsistencies of facial expression.

"Ah, *Tesoro mio!* I have caught you at last; sit down and tell me everything about it from first to last, every word without a skip," cried out the delighted Countess. "Such a night as I have had watching and imagining! Self-control leaves me when the happiness of a child is concerned; the mother rises up so strong I cannot help it. I saw the last of him this morning, my Duchess! he went off with a mother's blessing on his journey. We shall have him back with an uncle's blessing, I trust, but we shall be satisfied whether he brings it or not. I don't mind your looking pale, my pearl, it becomes you; whatever way you look this morning, you are beautiful. And whether the uncle consents or not, what matter? Anyway, the Clinton diamonds are an heir-loom; they must come to you, the Clinton diamonds and the Pomfret jewel of jewels. What a Duchess you will make! Fancy the rage of the Pelhams! How the raving old Methodist Lady Barbara will enjoy

this news! They did everything to snare him, I knew of it all from the beginning; played every card in the pack at him—decoyed him down to their den at Esher, and set him reading tracts with Lady Barbara and all; but heaven had a better fate in store for him. I think he almost deserves you, my queen; if any man in England could deserve you, Lincoln does. Come! go back to the beginning and tell me everything about yourself. You do look pale, but 'tis with happiness. Ah! 'happiness,' there is no cosmetic like it."

"Yes, I am very happy. There is no one like him, as you say; such a noble nature, such sentiments—" Lady Sophia stopped. "He is everything that you could desire, mamma; there is no one like him," she repeated, coming to a full stop.

"Fortunately we are not looking out for another of the same pattern at present," answered the Countess, gaily; "and as to his perfections, they are admitted. But my old ears are hungry to suck in your dainty secrets. I want to taste the sweet poison of lovers' vows once

more. Who knows if the gentlemen of your day are as brisk and tender as were the gallants of ours? Alas! old fright that I am now, who would imagine that I had ever been sentimental and a coquette—who would believe it? Your father was never much of a serenader at any time, it is true, but he was not my first lover, there were others. Alas! I should blush to boast of it, perhaps, but there were. The fashion then was so, and one did not like to put up for being better than other people, like that old saint Lady Barbara, who never in her best day had much temptation to be anything else but a saint. Things are improved since in matters of sentiment, and I approve of the change; people marry from affection now and not according to the odious foreign plan, by arrangement. However, 'tis not every girl who marries her first love. You are very lucky, and such a first love—ah! there is nothing else in life to compare with it, as Mr. Spence the poet said to me in Italy, when the crazy Count with the beautiful eyes went about singing madrigals to the stars about yours,

happy Florence, 'O *Firenze.*' I always had a presentiment that something would come of the Ridolfi ; there was a fate in your meeting there by accident ; but there is no such thing as accident, providence arranged it for us ; I think so now. Your happiness has almost made me religious. Come ! tell me. Don't continue to keep your doting old mother any longer in suspense, my angel ! there is another kiss for you. When, where, how, in what language did he propose ? was he modest ? shamefaced, I daresay. I trust you did not give him an easy victory."

Lady Sophia's eyes filled up, the Countess began to kiss her tenderly during the pause, purring in an interjectional under-tone. "Only to think of it ! Duchess of Lincoln, Countess of Newcastle ; no, that is not it, no wonder my old wits are addled with joy. Could I see you Duchess of Newcastle, but for a single day, I should go to heaven a happy woman. Consider what it means ! Mr. Walpole says the Duke has a wardrobe of gold plate fit to figure in the Arabian

Tales. I shall be civil to Mr. Walpole now you are going to be married, before it was different; but I always found him pleasant and conversable, and his father, too, so thought of by the king; his Majesty can't live without Sir Robert. That plate must come to you, Lincoln being the heir—it must, with the rest—the family jewels are a dowry in themselves. I am not spiteful naturally, but when I reflect on what Lady Barbara and Lady Caroline will think—however, the Pelhams can't have things always their own way, they regard this world as made only for themselves. Pride will have a fall—it must; and cunning falls short sometimes—always pushing and puffing each other, and holding together by the family coat-tails to acquire greater strength and seize the lion's share of everything; sooner or later such people will get their deserts. Lady Caroline, with all her airs, deserves a reverse as much as anybody—deserves to be humbled; she has earned it; a fall would do her good. She assumes more importance, I often thought, than poor Queen

Caroline herself. My own idol, no wonder I am bewildered with joy." Then the Countess looked up with a start, and in a quick, sharp tone cried out, "What in heaven's name are you staring at, child? what are these tears for?" The truth burst out in all its force, something was hideously amiss, for the exclamation brought out the quick rejoinder, "Mamma, you will drive me mad! how you take everything for granted. Can't you understand that there is nothing to tell you about? that there has *not been any proposal at all?*" It was out now; the Countess caught the words, and a quick tightness in the throat told her how well she understood them. "There has not been that exactly yet, nothing so positive as yet." Lady Sophia was in haste to get it all out before the violence of sobbing came on. "Not an engagement; he must see his uncle first; there are difficulties in that way, certain things that must be explained. Mamma, do not be hard with me, it is not any fault of mine," added the girl piteously.

"Mop up your eyes this minute; say in two

words what I am to understand." The Countess turned from white to crimson.

"I only know that he loves me, that I have his affection, that is all," whimpers Lady Sophia in a frightened way. "He did not seek a return from me yet, he asks for nothing until he hears from the Duke."

"Hears from his grandmother! He has made a declaration to you!"

"And I have confidence in his constancy and affection, mamma. You know it concerns me most of all, and when I have confidence, what matter, when it concerns me more than anybody?"

"A declaration of *love*, not of marriage, and then talk of his uncle, and you—you suffered him, and did not send for your booby of a brother, for the servants and grooms to thrust him out of your father's house!" screamed the Countess.

There was some rebellion in the upraised tearful face.

"He has gone away to see the Duke at once,

he is very determined about it; he left on purpose."

"He is excellent at going away; he has convinced us already that he can proceed so far," said the mother, grimly. "You foolish, miserable, ungrateful child! You satisfied! you are easily pleased, when a gentleman testifies the strength of his passion by promptitude in turning his back; it was not the mode in my day. *His uncle—the Duke!*" It was not so much the scorn in which she pronounced these words as the energy of gesture accompanying them; perhaps in all her life the Countess was never so near striking her daughter on the spot, not so much in anger as by way of conveying only a sufficiently explanatory degree of vigour and of emphasis to her feelings. Then she folded her arms quietly behind her back as if with the notion of snatching them away from that which was irresistibly becoming a nervous inclination to do. There was the river and the broad light sweeping over the landscape, and the nodding branches rustling on a level with her

feet, and the mean-looking china roses clustering up the trellis of the arbour, while the creaky bell from the farm-buildings came tinkling down the wind in a wheezy yet rollicking and good-humoured discord.

On the sheep-walk behind, a shepherd was whistling to his dog—how she hated all, landscape, roses, children—what a detestable world! If something would only come at once to overwhelm, and make an end of it!

In the next instant the angry Countess changed her attitude, Lady Sophia lay back on the wicker-work seat of the arbour, as pale as a corpse.

"Mamma, I am very faint."

The tide of feeling rushed back as suddenly in the other direction. The pent-up maternal instincts burst through every barrier, and the Countess hung over her daughter, soothing her with caressing words, undoing the fastenings around her throat, pushing back the waving hair from the beautiful brow. She understood then that she had been harsh and unkind, that sympathy and aid

were due to this timid palpitating heart; there was pity and compassion in her touch. She kissed her daughter tenderly, soothing and petting in a kind womanly way. A tear, a single tear oozed from the maternal eyelid and stopped midway in its descent. Symbol of compassion or of disappointment? No matter which. But their places were rapidly changed; it was the mother's turn now to plead against despondency, to sustain a wavering faith, and make-believe herself to see things in a brighter aspect. This restored a full degree of confidence, and things really did appear to be brighter for the restoration. Or else it was a natural reaction from the first violence of disappointment; but the Countess herself grew more hopeful in listening to her daughter's story.

It was something that Lord Lincoln should have gone straight off to make a declaration to his uncle, timid and vacillating as he had ever been—there was so far a guarantee of earnestness in that.

"So things are not so bad. Why didn't you mention it all at first?" said the mother brightly, glad to see the delicate flesh tints warm up again as she rearranged the laces and ribands binding the Juno-like throat. "You are always for keeping me in some suspense about your secrets, and you know suspense is what I cannot endure. My temper is too quick for it. It vexed me at first, I confess, to think that Lincoln should still choose to consider himself a child, and that the old buffoon, Newcastle, is to be for ever tugging at the end of his leading strings."

"He regards him as a son, and has already done more for him than many a father would," pleaded Lady Sophia; "besides, the kindness of his disposition prevents him from offending any human being, and I admire him for it," she added, sturdily.

"It may be right to show respect, particularly when he has such expectations from the old man, but that is no reason why I should love his grace," said the Countess, "and I do not. However, the

Duke is so fond of Lincoln that he cannot refuse anything he persistently asks for."

"And he will be so persistent," said Lady Sophia in a doubtful tone; "he promised that he would.

"Unquestionably I should prefer to have the old man's consent. On the whole it would be better," added the Countess with a dogmatic air, as if the question was waiting only for her decision or approval; "but in the end if it must be, then we shall manage to do without it. The knot once tied, everything will be right. He will forgive and make friends; sooner or later Lincoln will be his heir all the same, never doubt; so mend your spirits and your face, I am quite hopeful now. Believe me, if young people are constant and determined, the old must end by giving in. Hush! here are footsteps; what a misery not to have even a moment to oneself! Who would have thought of anybody following us up here!" A burst of laughter outside in a rippling treble brought Lady Sophia to her feet, and Mrs. Commyns and

Miss Montagu appeared; the latter was reading aloud from an open letter.

Mrs. Commyns was visibly panting, and flounced down on the nearest end of the seat.

"It is such a climb up here, no wonder you are out of breath. I wonder you ventured so far," said Lady Pomfret in a rapid tone, eyeing her daughter and wondering whether her pallid face would pass muster with Mrs. Commyns—whether that lynx-eyed matron would notice any traces of a scene.

"I am out of breath with laughing," said Mrs. Commyns; "Here, Miss Montagu has had a letter from her relative the old Dragoness, Lady Granville, relating the grief she endures because of poor Lady Carteret's death. As if death were anything but a release to the poor lady, a release from the claws of such a mother-in-law! A dreadful ordeal for a young girl to be thrust into a family which despises her, don't you think so, Lady Pomfret? I wonder at the worldliness of parents who permit their children to undergo such torture. I am sometimes thankful that I haven't a daughter, when I

see a young life on the point of being ruined by the shortsighted ambition of selfish parents. On the other hand, I often regret that the daughter is not my child in order that I might interpose to save her happiness; people grow so heartless when vanity and avarice lay hold of them. Dear me, how very hot!—it must be more of a journey up here than I imagined, though I am a good walker. And to think of the old wretch having the hypocrisy to wear weepers after driving the unhappy lady into her grave," continued Mrs. Commyns. "Pray read a passage from the letter, it is from Eliza Montagu. Mrs. Montagu excels in letter-writing, she is almost as clever as your Ladyship in that art, and she happened to call at Arlington Street on a visit of condolence. As your Ladyship looks out of humour it will make you laugh. Pray read that passage from your letter, Miss Montagu, Lady Pomfret will be highly amused."

"I never was in better spirits in my life," said the Countess.

"Then this scene of tenderness and sorrow will

have a proper effect upon you all the same," said Miss Montagu, reading aloud:

"*Lady Granville sighed and tossed, and thumped, and praised and blamed; most pathetically did she break out again and again, giving an account of the poor lady's death; breaking off every now and then to say all the disagreeable things she could think of to Eliza herself, that her appearance was shocking, that her jaws met, and her skin was black, and that she would not recognise her.*

"*Then back again to the chief subject. 'How poor Lady Carteret got her death going abroad with a cold. For if poor dear Lady Carteret had a fault—not that I know poor dear Lady Carteret had a fault;—nay, I believe poor dear Lady Carteret had never a fault, but if she had a fault it was that she loved to dress and go out; and then you know that she never spared herself: she would talk, always talk, but it was to be so, it was ordained that she should die abroad.' All this, yea, and much more than mortal memory can register, did she utter in a breath. Had her eloquence one happy interval for me to have made my honours*

and escaped, how blest had I been; but as Mirabel says of Lady Wishfort, 'one must wait till she dies to catch her last word.'"

"This may be very sprightly, but I confess it is little to my taste; I think that Mrs. Montagu, with her reputation for writing, might have found a more agreeable subject to exercise her wit upon," said Lady Pomfret, crossly.

"There is surely no more agreeable subject in the world than the old Dragoness," said Mrs. Commyns.

"I refer to the flippant references to the sad event. I must condemn the sentiment of that letter. I wonder it provoked your laughter."

"It makes me shiver," said Lady Sophia; "it seems to me that there is a fate in it, something ominous referring to myself in this dismal story—the odd way in which it comes obtruding itself at every hand's turn."

"Your fate. Oh! that will be very different," said Mrs. Commyns, looking at her curiously, and then at Miss Montagu, who was primly drawing

parallel lines on the ground with the point of her parasol. "But it is natural to happiness to be accompanied by presentiments, that is a law of nature, and one can understand that at present you may be a prey to them; they are wisely given sometimes as make-weights to prevent us toppling over in the mere giddiness of our joy. You must be looking very far beforehand indeed, or be very free from tangible causes of anxiety, when you see anything referring to yourself or likely to affect you in the sad fate of Lady Carteret."

Lady Pomfret made no answer. Then a further pause. Mrs. Commyns could not make head against the chilling demeanour of mother and daughter, but the instincts of her ferret nature were not at fault. She felt that something was wrong, and would have liked to burrow farther in search of a secret which she was conscious of feeling warm and near somewhere under her hand; however, Lady Pomfret maintained her cold and cautious manner, and the conversation lapsed.

Long afterwards Mrs. Commyns remembered that

casual allusion to the fate of Lady Carteret, and saw how direct a reference it bore to the destiny of Lady Sophia Fermor, and that her own words then bore a prophetic interpretation—one of those random shots going direct to an unseen mark, as if not hazard but destiny had guided the arrow.

CHAPTER XVI.

LORD LINCOLN TAKES ANOTHER RESOLUTION.

Lord Lincoln started on his journey to town in a thoroughly earnest mood, resolved to have an interview with his uncle forthwith to explain matters exactly as they stood, and, come what would of it, crush any obstacle which barred his direct road to Paradise.

There was to be no doubting this time, he would go through with the affair to the end whatever the price to be paid for thoroughness might be.

Having at last succeeded in hammering out his purpose into a definite shape, he resolved to adhere to it stoutly. He mentally traced out a distinct map of procedure for himself, and from that there was to be no departure, the period of doubt and vacillation had now gone by.

Being in this manly frame of mind he naturally longed for action; and it was moreover in obedience to a real necessity that he had quitted Easton Neston so abruptly, for added to his eagerness as a lover was the fear of missing the opportunity of seeing his uncle at all; a rumour having prevailed that the Duke was summoned to attend His Majesty in Hanover, that he was going there, or that he had already set forth; late despatches from town were full of such reports.

It was certain that much doubt existed as to the Duke's intentions with regard to this trip. It was a favourite peculiarity of that great statesman to mystify the public on this special subject. He was constantly in a state of going to Hanover, and bets were made at the clubs as to whether he was going—or gone—or intended to set out at all. With the Duke, one of the principles of statesmanship appeared to be to deceive for the pleasure of the art itself. Illustrating this peculiarity, and with reference to similar Hanover rumours which were rife on another occasion, Walpole writes:

"The Duke of Newcastle is not gone: he has kissed hands and talks of going this week; the time presses, and he has not above three days to fall dangerously ill. There are a thousand wagers laid against his going: he has hired a transport, for the yacht is not big enough to convey all the tables and chairs and conveniences that he trails along with him, and which he seems to think don't grow out of England. I don't know how he proposes to lug them through Holland and Germany, though any objections that the map can make to his progress don't count, for he is literally so ignorant, that when one goes to take leave of him he asks your commands into the north, concluding that Hanover is north of Great Britain because it is in the northern province, which he has just taken; you will scarcely believe this, but 'pon my honour it is true."

However, Lord Lincoln being now in a state of alarm on this point, proceeded to town with all possible despatch. A courier rode on before to have the jaded post-horses ready harnessed

for the arrival of his chariot. These patient animals were flogged unmercifully to gratify the ardour of the enamoured traveller.

How vast is the influence of trifles in directing destiny. If Lincoln could have stepped into a first-class carriage, and run up to town in an hour, while the love-fit was still hot on him, it is probable that the interview with his uncle would have taken place on the same day, and, whether amicably or not, an arrangement come to then. The same night's post would have carried down news of the proceedings into Northamptonshire, and everybody concerned have been superlatively happy or miserable for life in twelve hours after post delivery; but the locomotive arrangements of the period were clumsy and unreliable, and the ride up to London was tedious. At Leighton Buzzard there was an annual fair, and the tide of universal drinking had drenched the postilions. There were highwaymen lying about waiting for the homeward-bound cattle-dealers, and my Lord had to mount a supernumerary out-rider. More-

over, he took Diggon, one of the constables of Dunstable, back to that town with him for greater protection. Diggon had a blunderbuss and sat upon the box, my Lord taking his servant Alphonse inside to make room for the constable. Alphonse was nervous in this strange country, and glad enough to come down from his exposed perch outside. Dunstable itself was safely reached towards nightfall, and in rattling over the abominable pavement of that town the linchpin slipped out, and a wheel came off the chariot. The travellers had a fortunate escape of it; and Alphonse screamed as his arm—the sore one, that with the secret scrape under the ruffle—received a squeeze in the shock. This proved a serious annoyance, for the shaft of the carriage was wrenched out of truth, and, the morrow being Sunday, the smith turned out to be a strict Methodist, who for all the lords in Christendom would not incur the chance of unmentionable flames by blowing his bellows on the Sabbath.

So our hero was obliged to pass Sunday in

Dunstable, to his sore distress. He had abundant leisure to reflect there. Alas! the difficulties of his enterprise and the pains of his position did not diminish by reflection. It was very distressing to recognise that one way or other he would have to go through with something which must be exceedingly disagreeable to himself. He did not like to give pain to his uncle, he did not like incurring pain of any kind himself, he never did; but he seemed to have no choice about it now.

Honour obliged him to proceed, honour itself—even in the absence of inclination, that alone would have been sufficient motive to urge him forward. Yet on maturer thought he did not dwell on this method of argument, it perversely cut both ways; the value of that noble sentiment as an impulse being diminished when he remembered the claims of Catherine Pelham; for honour somehow sounded as binding in one case as the other.

He preferred to repeat to himself that, having decided on one course, there was no use in dis-

tracting his mind by considering any other as even possible. Besides, in an affair of the affections, it was the privilege of every man to follow out his liking in a headstrong way, no matter whither that way might lead. Lincoln repeated this many times, he liked the sound of it—'twas manly, or something very much to the purpose, so he went and scrawled a lady's name on the window-pane of his sitting-room with his diamond ring; the reader need not be told which of the ladies' names it was: then he yawned and shivered, and wished that the interview with the Duke was fairly over, pondering over his wine at dinner, and afterwards went to afternoon service to pass the evening.

Another disappointment on reaching town—the Duke was not at Hanover, but at Claremont, and was not expected back for a few days—even so! Lincoln's resolution held up bravely for these few days. It had indeed rather gained than lost in spirit for the keeping; the time for action being deferred, he felt himself grow in purpose, as all of

us do when a certain period of enforced delay stands before the execution of a distasteful duty ; and when he did present himself at the Duke's mansion, the weatherglass of his valour had not declined many degrees.

The Duke inhabited the large house at the corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields, since divided into two; and when the young earl arrived in his carriage to inquire the news from Claremont, he did not in reality expect that the actual moment of trial had come. The safe interval of a journey up to town he believed still lay between him and the ordeal of an interview.

That certitude was however grievously shaken as he drove up to the mansion. Lord! what a press was there! Coaches, carriages, chairs; a beau, fresh alighted from his chair, was daintily picking his steps through the mud to the steps of the great man's portal; a doctor of divinity in a shovel hat was hurriedly descending from it on the other side, a sour look of disappointment on his pendulous cheeks. Lincoln had some hope from the dejected face of this

divine; it might be that he was disappointed at finding the Duke absent. Coming nearer, the crowd thickened: footmen and constables, a rabble of link boys, messengers, hawkers, ballad-singers, were all screaming, chattering, squabbling at foot of the steps. Occasionally through the press the staves of footmen opened a passage for an approaching chair; and as Lincoln's coach glided in slowly through the press, a superb chariot passed the other way, and also at an enforced walking pace. A magnificent equipage lined with pearl-grey brocade; the curtains of blue satin, and inside a reclining figure dressed in a canary-coloured suit of the same material as the curtains, with a spyglass to his eye. His jabot was fastened by an oval miniature set in stones. Venus reclining in her shell was the subject of the picture; the goddess had a dove upon her wrist. There were more doves disporting with Cupids on the silver-mounted panel of the vehicle. This was Ruskins, the great City broker, whose father had drawn up such a netful of wealth out of that

huge bubble which had engulfed so many hapless fortunes. Ruskins kept on the family business still, fop as he was, but he kept great state and great company besides, and successively represented several boroughs in Parliament, which he paid for at a handsome figure. The Duke must be at home, Lincoln thought, turning pale as the broker passed by. Ruskins was not a man to waste his minutes driving out on a fool's errand. Doubtless it was by appointment that he had come; so when Lincoln alighted and learned that his grace was neither at Claremont nor at Hanover, but actually upstairs, having posted up from Claremont on account of sudden despatches from abroad, it was not wholly a surprise. More of a disappointment would have been more welcome to him than that news was at first. He hesitated for a moment; there were so many people waiting? However, one of the chamberlains appeared, and Lord Lincoln was officiously assured that his grace would be only too happy to receive his lordship at once in the private

study, for all the expectant crowd which filled the waiting-rooms and lobbies on that side of the house. So there was nothing for it but to follow the footman upstairs.

The private secretary's retreat was a very comfortable room, upholstered in almond-coloured silk; a marble writing-table with ormolu supports and fixings; on the table a superb paper-cutter, the blade in niello by Tommaso; the handle set in Russian topazes, a gift from Lord Grantham; on the mantelpiece, in bronze, a bust of Minerva.

"Henry! Henry! Henry!" The Duke cast his arms upward, striving to encircle the tall person of his nephew in an embrace; while, in wantonness of absurdity, kissing him, literally kissing on either cheek, or at random on what other portion of the face he could in his hurry and eagerness attain to.

"Henry! the last man alive I expected to meet now, and the most welcome visitor now and at all times, my son, my pride, my hope," cried his grace pausing in his kisses. "How glad I am to see you!

I thought you away in the country." (Kiss.) "When did you reach town? Have you breakfasted? Have you lunched? Are you come to remain here? I that expected you at Claremont, and feared you might arrive there during my imprisonment here. Mr. Secretary Wilmot, you may leave, you can retire," added the Duke in a formal tone, leading Lincoln into the room, and pompously signalling a gentleman in scrupulous black, who gravely rose from a table littered with documents, and made for the door. "Gently, Mr. Wilmot, gently, do not shake the room; you know I cannot bear these noises at present. Wait without for my signal. I shall summon you presently," he added; scowling as the cringing secretary crept away. Then the great statesman lay back in his chair with an exhausted air, his eyes resting meditatively on the effigy of Minerva. He was one of the most extraordinary characters in history. Let us take a look at him as he sat, with Lord Lincoln on his right hand, staring hard into the crown of his laced hat, meditating also—he did not know which end of his

awkward subject to present first. Yet now that the critical moment had arrived he manfully resolved to proceed with the business to the end—to the sweet or bitter end, whatever consequences should come of it.

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